

# interzone

MARCH 2000

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## 'Cadre Siblings'

Stephen Baxter



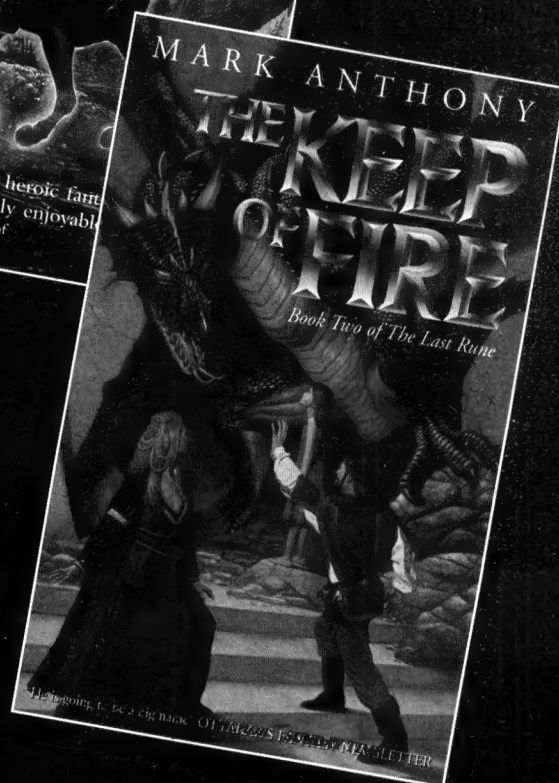
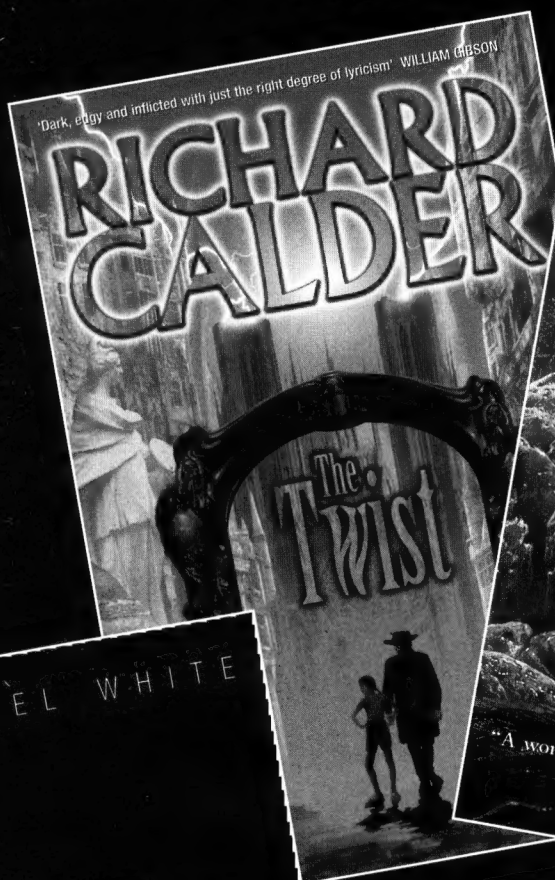
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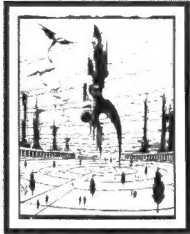


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# interzone

science fiction & fantasy

MARCH 2000

Number 153

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**Cover by Dominic Harman** for "Cadre Siblings"

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# INTERFACE



## Interzone 1999 Popularity Poll

This is the March 2000 issue, mailed in February. Over the coming weeks, we'd be grateful if readers could consider rating the past year's stories. Let us know your thoughts on the contents of issues 139 to 150 inclusive (no need to wait until you've read the last two issues, and the present one, as they will count towards *next* year's poll).

We'd appreciate it if readers (especially those who are renewing their subscriptions) could send us answers to the following questions. Just write or type your replies on any piece of paper and send them to us before the deadline of **30th April 2000**. We'll report the results later in the year.

- 1) Which stories in *Interzone* issues 139-150 inclusive (i.e. those with a 1999 cover date) did you particularly like?
  - 2) Which stories in *Interzone* issues 139-150 inclusive did you particularly dislike (if any)?
- Any further comments about the magazine, including its non-fiction and artwork, would also be most welcome.

Dear Editors:

I noticed a letter a few issues ago stating that the reader did not find *Interzone's* non-fiction articles of much interest, and would like to see a greater proportion of fiction.

I would like to balance that and state that the first thing that I do is to read all of the non-fiction articles, in a single sitting, then over the next few days read the stories.

I am happy with the amount of non-fiction at the moment; I do miss the television critique ("Tube Corn"?), but I can see that there is not much on which to comment...

Keep up the good work; I have decided to support *Interzone*, and have sent in my lifetime subscription amount... I now hope you last at least another 10 years!

**Martin L. V. Jenkins**  
Bristol

## "A Modem Utopia"

Dear Editors:

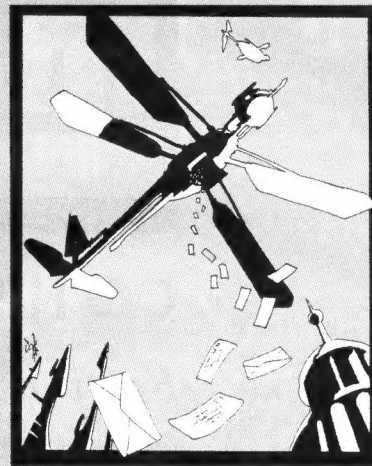
Gary Westfahl ("A Modem Utopia," *IZ* 149) does have valid points regarding modern society, but he has made some of them with cheap shots. For example, the fact that Mr Westfahl's neighbour washes his car once every weekend does not reveal his entire nature; having a filthy car doesn't confer virtue by converse. Mr Westfahl made it pretty clear that he doesn't know the man, yet judges him solely on observing this one behaviour.

Later on he makes a blanket condemnation regarding beer-drinking: "Had I remained solely in the company of the people that life threw in my path, I might have devolved into a beer-drinking cretin..." I doubt that drinking beer is particularly related to being a cretin.

What I'm on about here is that he sounds like the all too common variety of academic who sneers at the presumed lesser intelligence of his neighbours. It's an unfortunate tone that undermines a valid premise. I heartily concur regarding the benefits of virtual communities, but it seems to me that the case could have been made without the use of stereotyping.

Long live the Machine and may it prosper and flourish.

**Rand Gray**  
Hillsboro, Oregon  
rand.gray@worldnet.att.net



## INTERACTION

Dear Editors:

Children, 14-year-old daughters or otherwise, are usually quite perceptive. Not only does Gary Westfahl appear to not have a life, he's proud of it too. It's hard to tell if his opening paragraphs are tongue-in-cheek, but if Mr Westfahl really is so tired after work that he refuses to engage in conversation with his own family, if he is relieved of other responsibilities at weekends so he can do even more work,

then it's hard to understand what he's actually doing it all for.

If you don't interact with your environment, you're not part of it, but it seems to me that Mr Westfahl is really objecting to people taking pleasure in activities he's not moved to do himself. If people want to bowl – fine, if they want to drink beer and rant at the Dodgers' pitching skills, that's fine too. It doesn't make them cretins, which is an unpleasant thing to say and, for me, particularly hard to swallow from someone who seems to think playing Bridge is not a tedious waste of time.

Despite what he says, unless his part of America is different from my part of England, neighbourhoods are not random collections of people. They are usually groups of people with similar educational and cultural backgrounds, with similar earning potential. Maybe that's what he doesn't like about them. I don't like all of my neighbours, I certainly socialize with some of them more than Mr Westfahl implies he interacts with any of his. I absolutely interact with them more than he does with his partners during his anonymous Bridge sessions (how can that possibly be a good example of a cybernetic community?) but I don't think I'm *better* than any of them.

Mr Westfahl thinks electronic information exchange (e-mail and the internet) is a replacement for social interaction. This is a foolish, self-deluding and fundamental error, because it is just an enhancement, just an extra way of communicating. It is a wonderful enhancement, to be sure (I found my current job through the internet), and I love keeping in touch with my friends that way, wherever they or I may be. I've made new friends too, people I've not yet met (but I hope to, because that's what friends do). I know from experience that it is liberating for people who cannot, or find it very hard to, socialise in other ways. They are



good people too, and perhaps Mr Westfahl's car-washing neighbour is as well. Maybe shiny cars is just his thing, maybe it was his way of socializing with his sons, maybe his home life was a misery and it was an escape. The thing is, unless you go and talk to the chap, you'll never know.

But then it's much easier to mock from a safe distance than actually bothering to find out, isn't it? And probably a lot more fun, and so very clever, because now, if Mr Neighbour ever smiles and says "Good morning" you can think he's an even bigger idiot than you did before. It's all very well to say that all activities and experiences ever known to humanity are still available, but if you don't actually go out and do one or two of them, again, why bother?

Build an electronic community if you like, but let us also talk about the disadvantages and implications too. Disadvantages such as the exclusion of the poor from yet another wealthy person's club, implications such as how our mind-sets seem to be changing so the internet seems to be seen as "the only way" to achieve things in some parts of society and government, and the restrictions that this method of communication imposes on us. Give us an interpretation of "The medium is the message" for e-mail.

As for the rest of the issue – some very good fiction, the best for the past few issues. I particularly liked Paul J. McAuley's story and I even enjoyed Newman's "Angel Down, Sussex," which surprised me because alternative history stories are not usually my thing at all.

**David Gullen**

*Dave@gullen.demon.co.uk*

**Editor:** The following more positive response to the same piece was sent to Gary Westfahl direct, who forwarded it on to us:

Dear Mr Westfahl:

Having picked up *Interzone* for the first time with issue 149 I spent the weekend diligently ploughing through its many and varied articles, stories and reviews. By far the standout to me so far was your article entitled "A Modern Utopia."

As someone who is trying to develop the potential of the Internet within my work environment, I can testify to the constant derision and suspicion of others that you highlight in relation to diminishing social contact and its negative outcomes.

I really enjoyed your handling of the subject which was both thought provoking and humorous. Of particular interest were your insights into the Internet liberating us rather than alienating us and into the empowerment and disempowerment of those with differing

social and physical skills.

I look forward to reading more of your material in *Interzone* in the future as I now feel drawn to read it regularly.

**Rob Jackson**

## "Angel Down, Sussex"

Dear Editors:

I've just used the Christmas break to catch up on a backlog of reading, so I'm only now able to send you some comments on Kim Newman's "Angel Down, Sussex" (*IZ* 149). First, let me say that I greatly enjoyed the story: an admirable conceit, as they might have said in 1925. And that brings me to one minor criticism: a couple of lapses in the period language. One I'd challenge would be the farmer's reference to the vicar by a familiar name. It just doesn't seem to fit the social environment. Then there's the senior member of the Diogenes Club using "who" where "whom" is required. I think not.

Although it doesn't damage the plot in any way, anything to do with flying was seriously questionable. Our introduction: "Winthrop held Katie's stick forward..." is mystifying. When you push the stick forward in any aeroplane, it starts to descend. Then, a little later, after forcing Crowley's car off the road, Winthrop "cut the motors" (perhaps he meant "magnetos") and "upturned the flaps." Now certainly, the aircraft is referred to elsewhere as a *modified Sopwith Camel*, so perhaps the fitting of flaps is not completely out of the question, although it would make the aircraft virtually unique at this time. But if you had them, why would you put them *up* to slow down on landing? Mind you, a little earlier it has taken an entire ground crew of unspecified size to get Katie airborne. What exactly does Newman envisage as being necessary to get a small aeroplane into the air? As an old American instructor of mine would say: "Kick the tyres and light the fires" and you're away.

Still, these are quibbles. The characters in this story are definitely worth a few more outings. Might I recommend that they investigate some of the strange phenomena described in Charles Fort's contemporary books?

**Steve Graham**

*Lisburn, Northern Ireland  
Steve.Graham@earthling.net*

Dear Editors:

When letting my eyes run over the books on Reverend Haskins's bookshelves (cover of issue 149, by Dominic Harman), I could not help noticing a bulky volume entitled *Interzone*. I know that *IZ* has been around for quite a few years, but nearly 80? Quite a feat!

Keep going! The morning always brightens up when a new issue of *IZ* falls on my mat.

**Marlies Vaz Nunes**

*m\_vaz\_nunes@yahoo.com*

## Jack Vance Integral Edition

Dear Editors:

I'd like to bring to your attention a project to reprint the entire life's work of Jack Vance. The work of the VIE (Vance Integral Edition) is being done by Jack Vance fans who are volunteering their time (and sometimes money). We have the support of Jack Vance and he has allowed us access to all manuscripts that he has. Not only are we going to reprint his work, but working with original manuscripts, we are trying to restore his work to how he originally wrote it.

This project was born on the internet and is only possible because of the internet. The heads of the project just finished up a meeting in California at Jack Vance's house. Manuscripts were copied and a lot of mundane details of the project were hashed out, but everyone has jobs or school to take care of so most of our work will be done on-line. We have everyone from college students to NASA scientists working on the VIE. From all over the world. We had three volunteers from the UK at the work meeting and one of them suggested *Interzone* might be interested in what we are doing.

We already have the minimum (200) number of subscriptions needed to publish. We have not set a limit yet on how many we will print, but no more than 600 tops. Although it will be nice for us hardcore Vance fans to have his entire work available, the main purpose of the VIE is to generate publicity for an author that we think is sadly neglected. Perhaps the work that we do for the VIE will give Jack Vance a leg up for e-books or print on demand.

Please check us out at  
<http://www.vanceintegral.com/>

**John Robinson**

*johrange@ix.netcom.com*

## Correction

Dear Editors:

As ever, thanks to the two Neils (Neil Jones & Neil McIntosh) for reviewing Gardner Dozois's *Year's Best SF: Sixteenth Annual* (*IZ* 149). Please note two errors in their review: 1) Jim "Grimley" should be Jim Grimsley, and 2) the story "Zwarte Piet's Tale" by Allen Steele is not in the book. It was in the bound galley, but had to be dropped from the final book for reasons of length.

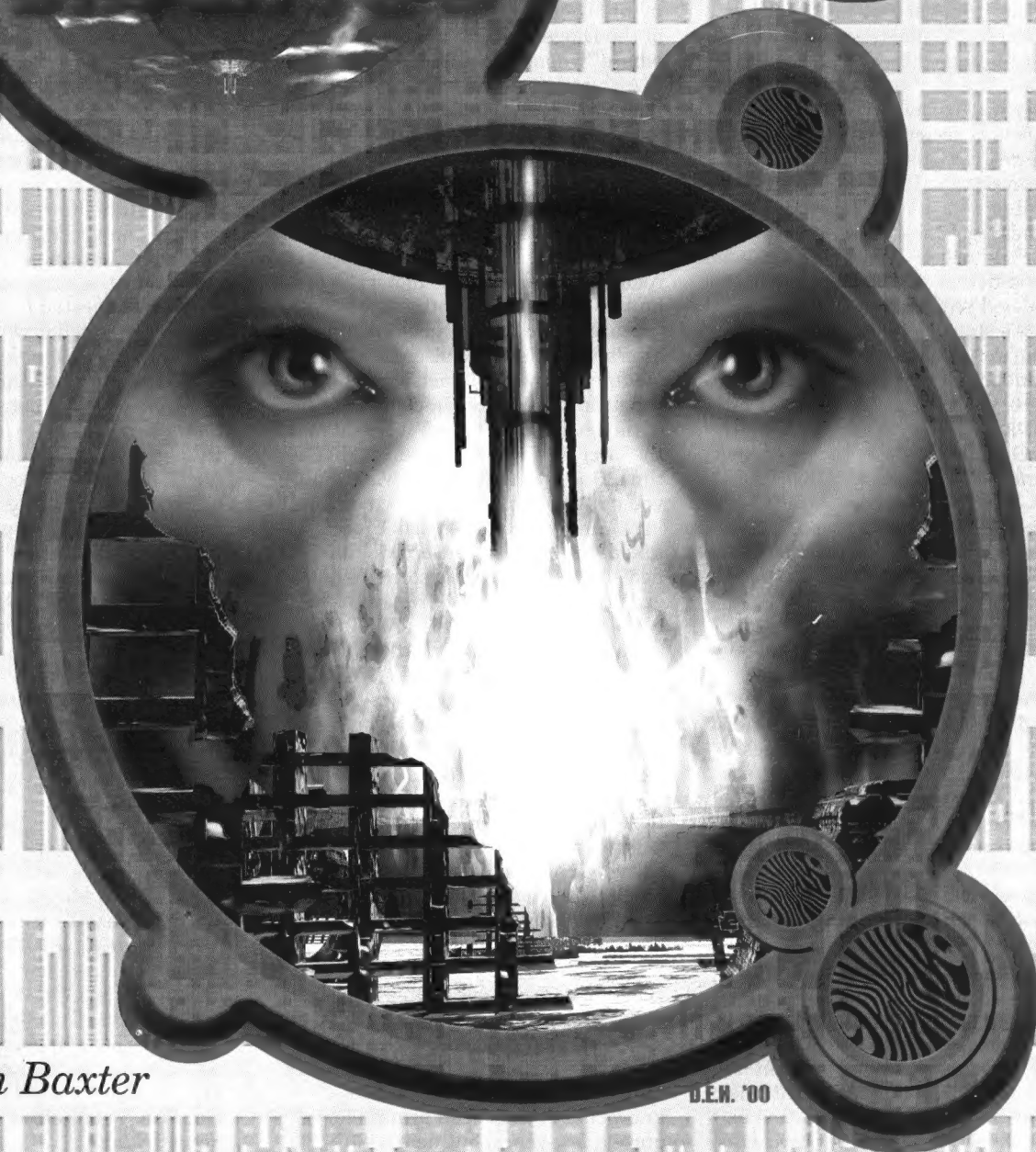
**Gordon Van Gelder**

*Senior Editor*

*St Martin's Press, New York*



# CADRE SIBLINGS



*Stephen Baxter*

D.E.H. '00



Before she was called into Gemo Cana's office for her awkward new assignment, Luru Parz had never thought of her work as destructive.

Cana stood before the window, a natural-light portal that betrayed her high status in the Directorate. Red-gold sunset light glimmered from the data slates fixed to the walls of the office. Beyond the pharaoh's squat frame Luru could see the glistening blown-silicate shells of the Conurbation's residential areas, laced by the blue-green of canals.

And on the misty horizon a Spline ship cruised above the occupied lands, swivelling like a vast eyeball. Where it passed there rose a great churning wave of earth and grass and splintered trees.

"Never," Cana murmured. "You *never* thought of it that way. Really? But we are destroying data here, Luru. That is what 'Extirpation' means. Obliteration. Eradication. A rooting out. Have you never thought about that?..."

Luru, impatient to get back to work, didn't know how to reply. If this was some new method of assessment, it was obscure, her strategy non-obvious. In fact she resented having to endure this obscure philosophizing from Cana, who most people regarded as a musty relic cluttering up the smooth running of the Directorate; even to report to a pharaoh was seen as a career impediment. She said, "I'm not sure what you're getting at."

"Then consider the library you are working on, beneath Solled Laik City. It is said that the library contains an ancestral tree for every man, woman and child on the planet, right up to the moment of the Occupation. Think of that: you or I could trace our history back thousands of years. Luru, one could argue that that library is part of the legacy of mankind. And your job is to destroy it. Doesn't that make you feel —" Cana's small hands opened, expressive — "ambiguous?"

Luru thought it over. "I don't even know where *Solled Laik City* is — or was. What does it matter? Work is just work."

Cana barked laughter. "With a moral void like that you'll go far, Luru Parz." Cana was short, stocky, her scalp covered by silver-white fuzz. Luru knew nobody else with *hair*, a side-effect of AS treatment, of course... Cana had once told Luru she remembered a time before the Occupation itself, two centuries back. It was a chilling thought. "Listen to me, Luru," Cana said now. "Not everybody is as — flexible — in their outlook as you. Not everybody is a fan of the Extirpation. Outside you will encounter hostility. You see a satisfying exercise in cleansing; they see only the destruction. They call us jasofts, you know. I remember an older term. Quislings."

Luru was baffled. Why was she talking about *outside*? Outside was for ragamuffins and bandits. "Who calls us jasofts?"

Cana smiled. "Poor little Luru, such a sheltered life. You don't even remember the Rebellion, do you? The Friends of Wigner —"

"The Rebellion was defeated five years before I was

born. What has it to do with me?"

"I have a new assignment for you," Cana said briskly. "Do you know Symon Suvan?"

Luru frowned. "We were cadre siblings, a couple of dissolutions ago." And, briefly, lovers.

Cana eyed her; Luru sensed she knew the truth. "Suvan left the Conurbation a year ago."

"He became a ragamuffin?" Luru wasn't particularly shocked; Symon, for all his charm, had always been petulant, difficult, incontinent.

"I want you to go and talk to him, about his research into superheavy elements... No, not that. None of *that* matters. I want you to talk to him about minimizing pain, and death. He has got himself in the way, you see."

Luru said stiffly, "I don't think this assignment is appropriate for me. My relationship with Symon is in the past."

Cana smiled. "A past you'd rather forget, a little Extirpation of your own? But because of that past he might listen to you. Don't worry; this will not damage your glittering career. And I know that bonds between cadre siblings are not strong; they are not intended to be. But you might persuade this boy to save his life, Luru."

"My goal is always to minimize distress. That is the reason I work in this place. It is our job to mediate the regime of the Qax. Things — deteriorated — after the Rebellion. Without us things would be much worse still... Which is why," she said slowly, "I regret asking this of you — especially you, Luru."

"I don't understand."

Cana sighed. "Of course you don't. Child, Jasoft Parz, the patronymic exemplar of our traitorous class, was your grandfather."

She sat in the flitter's small cabin, nervous, irritated, as the land peeled away beneath her.

From the air the spread of buildings, bubbles blown from scraped-bare bedrock, was glistening, almost organic. She could see the starbreaker-cut canals, arteries that imported desalinated water and food from the great offshore algae farms and returned waste to the great sink of the ocean. Down one canal bodies drifted in an orderly procession, glinting in plastic wrap; they were the night's dead, expended carcasses returning to the sea.

Conurbation 5204 had been constructed when Luru was ten years old. She remembered the day well; the construction had taken just minutes. There was talk that the Extirpation Directorate might soon be moved to a new location in the continental interior, in which case Conurbation 5204 would be razed flat in even less time, leaving no trace.

It was a relatively short flitter hop to Symon Suvan's research facility — short, but nevertheless longer than any journey Luru had taken before. And she was going to have to spend more time *outside* than she ever had before.

She didn't want to be here at all.

Luru's brief career, at the Extirpation Directorate in Conurbation 5204, had been pleasingly successful; in fact



she had been promoted to cadre leader for this new project, at 22 her first taste of real responsibility. She was working on a tailored data-cleanser package. The cleanser was to be sent into huge genealogical libraries recently discovered in a hardened shelter under the site known as Solled Laik City, evidently a pre-Occupation human city. The cleanser was a combination of intelligent interpretive agents, targeted virus packages and focused electromagnetic-pulse bursts, capable of multi-level eradication of the ancient data banks at philosophical, logical and physical levels. The cleanser was of conventional design; the project's challenge was in the scale and complexity and encryption of the millennia-old data to be deleted.

The work was complex, stretching, competitive: deeply satisfying to Luru, and a major progression along her career path within the Extirpation Directorate. And she resented being dragged away from the project like this, flung half-way across the continent, all for the benefit of a misfit like Symon Suvan.

She tried to distract herself with her notes on super-heavy elements, Symon's apparent obsession.

There was a natural limit to the size of the nucleus of an atom, it seemed. A nucleus was a cluster of protons whose positive electrical charges tended to drive them apart. The protons were held together by a comforting swarm of neutrons – neutral particles. Larger nuclei needed many neutrons to hold them together; lead-208, for example, contained 82 protons and 126 neutrons.

But the gluing abilities of the neutrons were limited. It was once believed that no nucleus could exist with more than a hundred or so protons. But some theorists had determined that there could be much larger nuclear configurations, with certain special geometries – and these were eventually discovered.

The lightest of the superheavy nuclei had 114 protons and 184 neutrons; the most common appeared to be an isotope called marsdenium-440, with 184 protons and a crowd of 256 neutrons. But there were much heavier nuclei still, with many hundreds of protons and neutrons. These strange nuclei were deformed, squashed into ellipsoids or even hollowed out...

She put down her data slate. She found it hard to concentrate on such useless abstractions – and she didn't understand how this could have absorbed Symon so much. She did wonder absently why "marsdenium" had that particular name: perhaps "Marsden" or "Marsdeni" was the name of its discoverer... Such historical details were long lost, of course.

As the flitter neared the top of its suborbital hop the curving Earth opened up around her, a rust-red land that glimmered with glassy scars – said to be the marks of humanity's last war against the Qax, but perhaps they were merely the sites of deleted Conurbations. A Spline craft toiled far beneath her, a great blister of flesh and metal ploughing open a great swathe of land, making its own patient, devastating contribution to the Extirpation.

Her flitter drifted to the ground, a few hundred metres from Symon Suvan's exotic matter plant. She emerged, blinking, beneath a tall sky; far from the small rounded chambers of the Conurbation, she felt small, frail, exposed.

This was a place called Mell Born. It had been spared the starbreaker ploughs so far, but even so nothing remained of the land's pre-Occupation human usage save a faint rectangular gridwork of foundations and rubble. The place was dominated by a single building, a giant blue-glowing ring: built and abandoned by the Qax, now occupied by a handful of ragamuffins who called themselves scientists. And there was evidence of a wider human presence here: a shanty town, an odd encrustation around the huge Qax facility.

Symon Suvan was here to meet her. He was tall, gaunt, looming, agitated, his eyes hollow; his bare scalp was tanned a pale pink by the unfiltered sun. "Lethe," he snapped. "You."

She was dismayed by his immediate anger. "Symon, I'm here to help you."

He eyed her mockingly. "You're here to destroy me. I always knew you would finish up like this. You actually *liked* running the mazes the Qax built for us – the tests, the meaningless career paths, the competitions between the cadres. All of this is just another pleasing intellectual puzzle to you, isn't it, in a lifetime of puzzles? Oh, the Qax are smart rulers. But you don't have any idea what your work *means*, do you?... Come with me." He grabbed her hand, and began to pull her towards the curved electric blue wall of the facility.

She shivered at the remembered warmth of his touch. But he was no longer her cadre-brother; he had become a ragamuffin, one of the dwindling tribes of humans who refused to remain in the Qax Conurbations, and his face was a thing of set planes and pursed lips, his determined anger intimidating.

To get to the Qax facility, clearly a place of high engineering and huge energies, they had to walk through the shanty community. It was a pit of rough, improvised dwellings, some little more than heaps of sheeting and rubble. But it was a functioning town, she realized slowly, with a food dispensing plant and a clinic and a water supply, even what looked like a rudimentary sewage system. She saw a small, dishevelled chapel, attached to a religion that even had adherents inside the Conurbation: the cult of a race of all-powerful aliens from beyond the stars, who rode in wonderful black-winged ships, and would one day free humanity from the rule of the Qax.

And all of this was laid over a mighty grid of rubble. There were still fragments of the old buildings, bits of wall and pipe poking like bones from the general wash of debris, some scarred by fire. Where vegetation had broken through the concrete, the remnant walls had become low hummocks coated with thick green blankets.

But there was a stink of smoke and sour humanity, and the air was full of dust which clung to her skin and

Progress

DELETE



clothes. It was hard to believe that any cadre sibling of hers would choose to live here. Yet here he was.

Symon was talking, rapidly, about superheavy elements. "It used to be thought that marsdenium and its more exotic sisters could only exist as technological artefacts, manufactured in giant facilities like this. But now we know that such elements can be born out of the great pressures of a supernova, the explosive death of a giant star."

She tried to focus. "An exploding star? Then why are you looking for heavy elements here on Earth?"

He smiled. "Because the Earth coalesced from a collapsing cloud of primordial gas and dust. And that cloud's collapse was triggered by the shock wave from a nearby supernova. You see? The primordial supernova laced the young Earth with superheavy matter..."

A small child was sitting on the lap of an older girl, playing with a toy of melted glass. The girl was the infant's cadre-sister, Luru supposed. The little one looked up, coughing, as they passed.

"This isn't a healthy place," Luru said.

"What did you expect?... But I keep forgetting. You expected nothing; you knew nothing. Luru, people die young in places like this. How else do you think I became so senior here so quickly? And yet they still come. *I came.*"

"Perhaps you were seduced by the closeness of these cadres." A healthy dissolution might restore the social balance here, she thought.

He stared at her. "There are no cadres here. The cadres, dissolved every couple of years, are another Qax social invention, imposed on humans. Didn't you know that? Luru, these are *families.*"

He had to explain what that meant. And that the girl who had nursed the child was not the little one's cadre sibling, but her mother.

They reached a door that had been crudely cut in the wall of the Qax facility. They passed through into an immense curving chamber.

Vast engines crouched. Hovering light globes cast long, complex shadows, and human technicians talked softly, dwarfed to insignificance. There was a smell of burned lubricant, of ozone. Luru was immediately overwhelmed.

Symon said, "This place was thrown up by the Qax after the Rebellion. It was one of hundreds around the planet. We think it was a factory for making exotic matter – that is, matter with a negative energy density. We refurbished the machinery, rebuilt much of it. Now we use it to make our own superheavy nuclei, by bombarding lumps of plutonium with high-energy calcium ions."

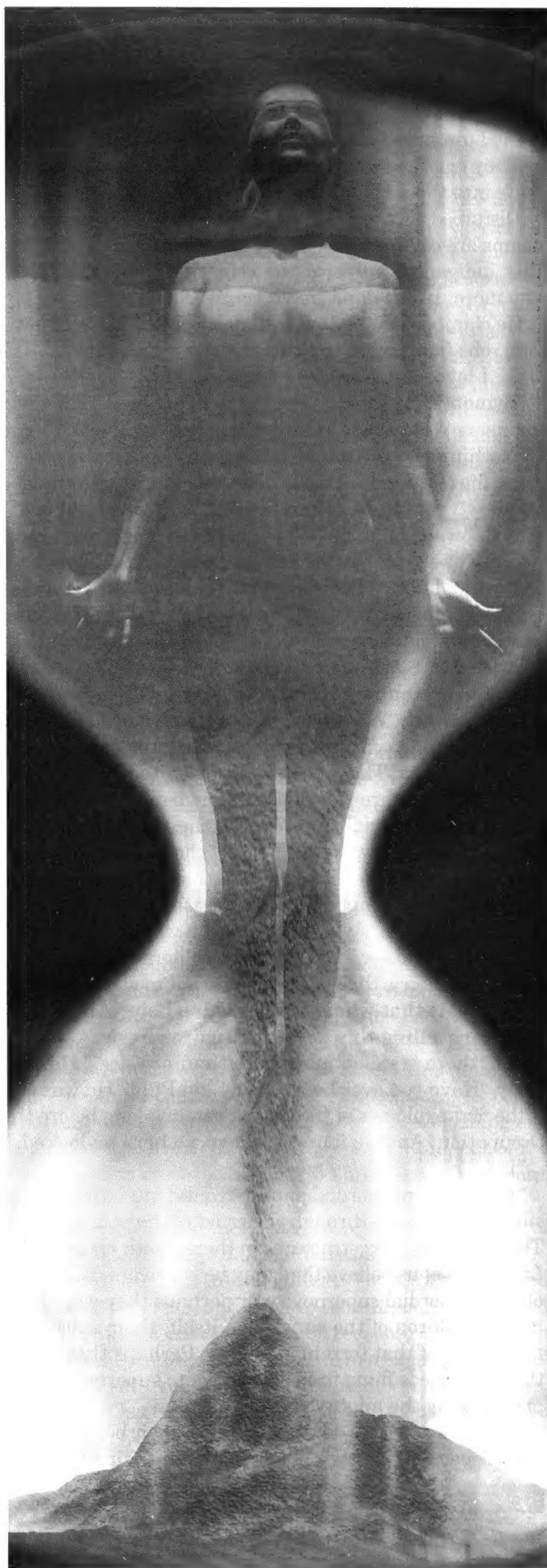
That puzzled her. He'd said his goal was the detection of superheavy elements in Earth's crust. So why was he manufacturing them?

"None of us knows for sure what the Qax were doing here," he was saying. "There is a rumour that the Qax were trying to build a tunnel *to the future*. It's even said that the Qax Governor itself is an immigrant from the future, where humanity is triumphant..."

"This is all nonsense, Symon."

"Is it? How do you *know*, Luru?"

It took her a moment to come up with a reply. "There are witnesses. The pharaohs."



"Like Gemo Cana?" Symon laughed. "Luru, there are no survivors from before the Occupation. The Qax withdrew AntiSenescence treatment for two centuries after the Occupation. *All the pharaohs died*. These modern undead, like Gemo Cana, have been bought by the Qax." He leaned towards her. "As they are buying you, Luru Parz."

They emerged from the clean blue calm of the facility, back into the grimy mire of the town.

Disturbed, disoriented, she said evenly, "The starbreaker beams are coming. Once the Qax tolerated activities like this, indigenous cultural and scientific endeavours. Not any more. If you don't move you will be killed."

He clambered on a low wall and spread his arms, his long robe flapping in the thin dusty breeze. "Ah. *Indigenous*. I love that word."

"Symon, come home. There's nothing here. The data cleansers were sent through this place long ago."

"Nothing? Look around you, Luru. Look at the size of these foundations... Once there was a host of immense buildings here, taller than the sky. And this roadway – where now we mine the old sewers for water – must have swarmed with traffic. Millions of people must have lived and worked here. It was a great city. *And it was human*, Luru. As long as these ruins are here we can imagine how it must once have been. But if these last traces are destroyed the past can never be retrieved. And that's what the Qax intend. Don't you see that?"

She frowned. "What I see is that the Friends of Wigner betrayed the Qax's cultural generosity towards indigenous ambitions. They used a cultural site to mask their sedition. Therefore that lassitude is being removed."

"That's the official line. *This* is the truth, Luru. The Extirpation isn't always a matter of clinical data deletion, you know. Sometimes the jasofts come here with their robots, and they simply burn and smash: books, paintings, artefacts. Perhaps if you saw that, you would understand. The Qax want to sever our roots – to obliterate our identity."

She felt angry, threatened; she tried to strike back at him. "And is that what you're seeking here? An *identity* from unravelling this piece of obscure physics?"

"Oh, there is much more here than physics." He said softly, "Have you ever heard of My-kal Puhl? He was one of the first explorers of the Solar System – long before the Occupation. And he found life, everywhere he looked."

"Life?"

"Luru, that primordial supernova did more than spray superheavy atoms through the crust of the young Earth. There were complex structures in there, exotic chemistries. *Life*. Some of us believe they may be survivors of a planet of the primordial supernova – or perhaps they were born in the cauldron of the supernova itself, their substance fizzing out of that torrent of energy. Perhaps they breed that way, seeds flung from supernova to supernova, bugs projected by the mighty sneezes of stars!

"There is much we don't understand: their biochemistry, the deeper ecology that supports them, their lifecycle –

even what they look like. And yet we know there is a forest down there, Luru, a chthonic forest beneath our feet, inhabited by creatures as old as the Earth itself."

Wonder flooded her, unwelcome. Bombarded by strangeness, she felt as if some internal barrier were breaking down, as if Symon's bizarre superheavy creatures were swimming through her mind.

He peered into her eyes, seeking understanding. "You see, even in these unimaginably difficult times, we are finding new life – just like My-kal Puhl. Now do you see why I'm prepared to fight for this place? Humans aren't meant to be drones, for the Qax or anybody else. *This* is what we live for. Exploration, and beauty, and truth."

She returned to Conurbation 5204, without Symon.

Her duty fulfilled, she tried to get back to work, to immerse herself once more. As always, there was much to do.

But the work was oddly unsatisfying; she was distracted by doubt. Could it really be true that her career trajectory, with its pleasing succession of tasks and promotions, was just a Qax social construct, a series of meaningless challenges meant to keep bright, proactive people like herself contented and contained?

Meanwhile it was a busy time in the Conurbation. The cadres were undergoing their biennial dissolution, and everybody was on the move, seeking new quarters, new friends, eager for the recreation festival to follow, of storytelling and sport and sex. The cramped corridors were crowded with people, all of them spindly tall, bald, pale – just as Luru was herself – all save the pharaohs, of course; they, having been born into richer times, were more disparate, tall and short, thin and squat, bald and hairy.

Luru had always enjoyed the friendly chaos of the dissolutions, the challenge of forming new relationships. But this time she found it difficult to focus her attention on her new cadre siblings.

At the age of 22 Luru was already done with childbirth. It was a routine service performed by all healthy women before they left their late teens; Luru had found no difficulty fulfilling her replacement quota. Now she looked at the swarms of children scrambling to their new cadres, excited, their bare scalps shining, and wondered if any of these noisy creatures could be *hers*.

Gemo Cana said, "I read your report. You're right to question why Suvan needs to manufacture his strange elements. He's obviously planning something..." She looked up from her data slate, as if seeing Luru for the first time. "Ah. But you aren't interested in Symon Suvan and his grubbing in the dirt, are you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Cana put down the slate. "It got to you. The outside. I can see it in you. I knew it would, of course. The only question is what difference it's going to make. Whether you will still be useful." She nodded. "Ask your questions,

Progress

DELETE



*destruction of the species* – an option the Qax have considered, believe me. That is what we must work ceaselessly to avoid.”

She stood, restless, and picked a slate off the wall. “Look at this. It is data on the deletion of data: a recursive register of destruction. And when all the primary information is gone, of course, we will have to delete this too. We must even forget that we forgot. And then forget that in turn... It will go on, Luru, a hierarchy of deletion and destruction, until – on one last data slate in an anonymous office like this – there will remain a single datum, the final trace of the huge historic exercise. If it falls to me I will erase that last record, gladly. And then there will be no trace left at all – *except in my heart*. And,” she added softly, “yours.”

Luru, half-understanding, was filled with fear and longing.

Canan eyed her. “I think you’re ready.” She reached into her desk and produced a translucent tablet the size of a thumb nail. “This modern treatment comes from the Qax themselves. They are able to manipulate biochemical structures at the molecular level – did you know that? It was their, umm, competitive edge when they first moved off their home planet. And this is the fruit of their study of mankind.” She set the tablet on the desk before her. “Take it.”

Luru said, “So it is true. You have been bought.”

Canan sat, her face crumpling into sadness; for an instant Luru had the impression of very great age indeed. “Suddenly you have grown a moral sense. I suppose that was what I hoped. But you really don’t understand, do you? *With endless life comes endless remembering*.”

“We cannot save the Earth from the Qax, Luru. They will complete this project, this Extirpation, whatever we do. And we must work with them, accept this ambiguous gift – we must continue to implement the Qax’s project, knowing what it means. For then – when everything else is gone, when even the fossils have been dug out of the ground – *we will still remember*. We are the true resistance, you see, not noisy fools like Symon Suvan.”

Luru tried to comprehend all of this, the layers of ambiguity, the compromise. “Why me?”

“You are the best and brightest. The Qax are pleased with your progress, and wish to recruit you.” She smiled thinly. “And, for exactly the same reasons, I need you. So much moral complexity, wrapped up in a single tiny tablet.”

Luru stood. “You told me you remembered how it was, before the Qax. But Symon said all the old pharaohs died during the Occupation. That nobody remembers...”

Canan’s face was expressionless. “If Suvan said that, it must be true.”

Luru closed her hand around the tablet.

When she returned to Mell Born she found it immersed

Luru Parz.”

Luru felt cold. “Symon Suvan told me that the Qax’s ultimate intention –

“Is to cauterize the past. I suppose he talked about our identity being dissolved, and so forth? Well, he’s right.” Canan sounded tired. “Of course he is. Think about what *you’ve* done.

What did you *think* was the purpose of it all? The Extirpation is – an erasing – of mankind’s past. A bonfire of identity. *That* is the truth.”

“But –”

“There are further plans, you know,” Canan said, ignoring her. “For example: the Spline starbreakers penetrate only the first few tens of metres of the ground, to obliterate shelters, archives and other traces. But the Qax intend to perform a great deep ploughing-up. They have a nanotech replicator dust, which... Well. You see, with such tools, even the fossils will be destroyed, even the geology: never to be retrieved, the wisdom they contain never to be deciphered.

“Another example. The Qax intend to force mass migrations of people, a mixing, a vast melting pot.” She touched her chest. “Then even *this* will be lost, you see, in a few generations – the differences between us, the history embedded in our bodies, our genes, our blood types. Lost forever. There is a simpler proposal, which may be just as effective, to replace our human names with some form of catalogue numbers. It will only take two or three generations before we forget...”

Luru was shocked at the thought of such vandalism. “The Qax are frightened of us,” she said slowly. “It’s true, isn’t it? Those legends of the future –”

Canan slammed her hand sharply on the desk top. “Such speculation isn’t for you. The alternative is worse – *the*

in shadow, for a Spline ship loomed above the ruins, shocking, massive.

Her flitter skimmed beneath the Spline's huge belly, seeking a place to land. The Spline rolled ponderously, weapon emplacements glinting. There was a sense of vast energies gathering.

The crude shanty town was being broken up. She could see a line of Directorate staff – no, of *jasofts* – moving through the ramshackle dwellings, driving a line of people before them, men, women and children. Beetle-like transports followed the line of the displaced, bearing a few hastily-grabbed belongings. The *jasofts* were dressed in skinsuits, their faces hidden behind translucent masks; the raw surface of Earth was not a place where inhabitants of the great Conurbations would walk unprotected.

A small group lingered near the electric blue walls of the Qax facility, robes flapping, their stubborn defiance apparent in their stance. One of them was Symon, of course.

She ran to him.

"I didn't think you would return." He waved at the toiling, fleeing people. "Are you proud of this?"

She said, "You are manufacturing superheavy elements, here in this facility. But why? Have you lied to me, Symon?"

"... Only a little," he said gently. "We understand something of the creatures of the rocky forest that has flourished beneath our feet."

"Yes?"

"We know what they eat –"

From the heart of the facility came a scream of tortured air, a soft concussion, a powerful, blood-red glow. The ground shuddered beneath their feet, and she held Symon. She could see the starbreaker itself now, a thread of ruby-red light that snaked down from the hide of the Spline; where it touched, buildings disintegrated, panels and beams flying high into the air.

"It has begun." She tried to pull him towards her flitter. "Symon, please. You were my cadre sibling; I don't want to see you die. *This* isn't worth a life."

A blankness came into his eyes, and he pulled away from her. "Ah. Not *your* life, perhaps. You see what a dreadful, clever gift this is? A long life makes you malleable. But my pitiful life – a few decades at best – what is the use of such a life save to make a single, defiant gesture?" He stepped away from her deliberately. He closed his eyes, and raised his arms into the air, robe flapping. "As for you – you must make your choice, Luru Parz."

And from beneath Symon's feet a bolt of dazzling light punched upwards, scattering debris and rock, and lancing into the heart of the Spline.

Luru fell back in the rubble, stunned. A shock wave billowed over her, peppering her with hot dust. There was a stink of meat, of corruption.

Symon was gone, gone in an instant.

And the roof of flesh above her seemed to tip, sinking with heavy gentleness towards the ground.

She turned and ran.

The flitter, saving itself, squirted towards the narrowing gap of daylight beneath that descending lid of flesh. Luru,

bloody, bruised, filthy, cowered in her seat as immense pocks and warts fled above her head. A dark, steaming fluid gushed from the huge scorched wound; it splashed over the ground, a lake of blood brought from another star.

Suddenly she burst into daylight. Beneath an open sky once more a vast oppression lifted from her.

She looked back. From the air she could see how the raking starbreaker beam had left a gouge like an immense fingernail scratching a tabletop. But the gouge was terminated by the dying Spline, already grounded, a deflating ball.

The flitter, in utter silence, tipped back and lifted her up towards the edge of space. The sky deepened to violet, and her racing heart slowed.

There must have been a cache of the strange, ancient supernova creatures, she decided, drawn there by Symon's superheavy-element bait. Perhaps the eruption had been purely a matter of physics, a response to the sudden release of pressure when the upper levels of the crust were stripped away. Or perhaps that great blow had been deliberate, a conscious lashing out, a manifestation of the rage of those ancient creatures at this disturbing of their aeons-long slumber.

... And now, all around the sky, she could see more Spline entering the atmosphere: four, five, six of them, great misty moons coming to Earth. A fine dust pulsed from them in thin, silvery clouds, almost beautiful. The dust spread through the air, settling quickly.

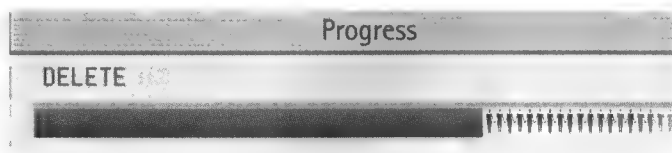
And where the glittering rain touched, the land began to soften, the valleys to subside, the hills to erode. It was shockingly fast. It was the wrath of the Qax, of course, the overlords' unhesitating response to this new stab of defiance, a nanotechnological drenching that would leave the planet a featureless beach of silicate dust.

She took the translucent tablet from a pocket of her skinsuit. The scrap of Qax technology gleamed, warm. She thought of the wizened, anguished face of Gemo Cana, of Symon's vibrant, passionate sacrifice. *You must make your choice, Luru Parz.*

I am too young, she thought. I have nothing to remember.

Nothing but what was done today.

As mountains crumbled, she swallowed the tablet.



**Stephen Baxter**, sf superstar, made his debut in *Interzone* in 1987. His latest books include *Longtusk* (Gollancz), the second of his novels about mammoths, and *The Light of Other Days* (Tor), a collaboration with Arthur C. Clarke. The latter is dedicated to the late Bob Shaw, by the way – in case readers should think Clarke 'n' Baxter are stealing a Shavian title (actually, Shaw got his famous short-story title from a poem by P. B. Shelley).



# Stealing Happy Hours

*Paul Di Filippo*

**T**he wedding reception could have been an excuse for a wake.

I had never attended a gloomier celebration. The courtroom proceedings for my own divorce – as rabid and raucous a ruckus as any since the days of Henry the Eighth – would have passed as a Saturday night during the pinnacle of Studio 54, when juxtaposed with this dreary affair.

At my table, reserved for unmated oddball friends of the bride and groom, a middle-aged woman on my left was endlessly stubbing out the same dead cigarette in the remains of her potatoes au gratin. The trim, elderly gent to my right had taken to polishing his eyeglasses to invisibility with a corner of his napkin. And across the littered expanse of tablecloth a 20-something gal – hair gelled sharp and coloured like a tetra's scales – chewed her drearily painted fingernails like a cougar

gnawing its own trap-brand lug. And as for myself, I wallowed in an orgy of long, deep sighs, foot-tapping and wedge-taved squirming.

And the biggest scandal of the whole day was that there was absolutely no reason for this pall.

Stan and Andrea were a wonderful couple: witty, young, energetic and generous. Everybody loved them. The vibe in the church had been one of overwhelming joy. Any tears had been consecrated with pride and pleasure. Every part of the ceremony had gone off without a hitch. Even the weather had co-operated, the June sunlight like some kind of photonic champagne.

But as soon as everybody had settled down in the lush banquet hall – bang! Complete morbid ennui descended inexplicably like soot from a smokestack over the entire party. The band, much touted, began to play. They sounded as leaden and lacklustre as an unpro-

grammed drum machine. The waitpeople circulated like bit players from a George Romero film. At the head table, the bride and groom and their attendants wore smiles as wan as that on the face of a felon who had just learned he'd escaped the death sentence but gotten life plus ten.

And it wasn't even like people weren't still resolutely *trying* to have fun. You could see it in their faces and postures. They were straining to enjoy themselves, having anticipated this day for months. The collective amount of energy being exerted by the crowd could have powered an Arctic icebreaking cutter. People grinned painfully and tried to chat throughout the meal. Forced laughter brittled the room. Much liquor was consumed. Couples strove to put some zip in their dancing. But all their efforts died on the vine. It was as if some invisible wet blanket an inch above our heads smothered all the excitement as soon as it was born.

When I saw Stan excuse himself, probably to go to the john, I got up too. I figured I'd catch him in the men's room and broach the problem to him, get his ideas about what anyone could do, even at this late hour, to liven things up. Also, I wanted to make sure he didn't hang himself with his bow tie from a pipe.

Strangely, in the lavatory I felt a little better. Stan nodded to me, and we peed at adjacent urinals without conversing, just relishing the psychic and physical relief. Then, zipping up, I spoke.

"Why's everyone on such a sudden massive downer, guy? Something happen I don't know about? Favourite uncle of Andrea's die between the church and here maybe? Stock market went down the tank? Nuclear war declared?"

"Jesus, Mitch, how should I know? I can't explain it. This was supposed to be the happiest day of my life, and instead I feel like I just got a ransom note for my unborn daughter. I've been racking my brain, but I can't come up with an answer. Food poisoning? Sick building syndrome? Roofies in the champagne? Maybe it's some weird fluke of the seating arrangements. But the majority of these people have known each other for decades. All hatchets have long been buried. I just can't come up with any reason that makes sense."

We started back toward the main room, and the closer we got, the more lacklustre I felt, as if I were a balloon man leaking his precious helium. My unease caused me to blurt out precisely what I was thinking.

"I sure hope your honeymoon doesn't suffer from this same mysterious malaise."

Stan got a look on his face like someone had dropped an anvil on his head. "Oh, Lord, this gloom and doom couldn't last past the reception, could it? Andrea's been dreaming about Hawaii for a year now."

"No, no, of course not."

We re-entered the hall, and that was when I saw him. The one person enjoying himself.

An innocuous fortyish fellow, utterly average-looking, he sat alone at the worst table in the place, near the exit and half-hidden by a pillar. Brimming glass in hand, he was nodding his head and tapping his foot in time to the morose strains of the band. Unlike most other dinner plates, his

had been totally cleaned, apparently with zeal, and he seemed to have consumed three pieces of cake, judging by the stacked dessert plates. A smile like the Great Rift Valley split his bland face, and his eyes gleamed.

I nodded toward the anomalous celebrant, and whispered to Stan. "Who's that?"

"I don't know. Must be from Andrea's side. I'll ask her."

Curious, I accompanied Stan back to the head table to learn the man's identity. But Andrea couldn't provide a name based on our Identikit description, and so she came back with us to eyeball him.

But he was gone, vanished.

And at that very moment the party began to take off. The music grew sprightly, the talk scintillated, the laughter ignited happy echoes, and Stan's 95-year-old Aunt Bertha hit the dance floor to illustrate the Charleston for all us youngsters.

I met Lorraine at a party some years after the memory of Stan and Andrea's weird wedding was nothing more than a dark blot on my mental landscape. Possessed of middling Mediterranean good looks and an average body, she nonetheless stood out from the bunched partygoers for the sheer amount of fun she was having. More so, since no one else – including me – seemed to be having a very good time.

But Lorraine, seated on the floor by the CD player, bobbed her head in blissful rhythm to the music, pausing only to sip her tall drink with evident satisfaction, and never failed to give a bright big "Hi!" to anyone who happened to glance her way. Most of the people singled out returned only a desultory grunt, the affair having reached such a desperate sump of surly unease.

I made my way across the room to this bubbly woman whose name I did not yet know, and dropped down beside her. Instantly, I felt immensely happy. I recall now wondering, Was this love at first sight?

"Hi! My name's Lorraine!"

"Mitch." We shook hands. "Where can I get a glass of whatever you're drinking?"

"What do you mean?"

"You seem to be the only person here enjoying yourself. It must be the booze."

"Silly! It's only ginger ale. Here, taste."

I did, conscious of the intimacy of the shared drink.

"Anyway, I never touch alcohol."

"What's your secret then?"

Lorraine shrugged, and I thought it the most charming shrug I had ever seen. Her gesture seemed to light up the room.

"Oh, I don't know. It's just a talent. The right mix of brain chemicals. I just seem to enjoy myself wherever I go."

"Life's too short, right?"

"Something like that."

"Think you could enjoy yourself if you left here with me?"

"Sure! I had you spotted first, though."

We grabbed our coats, and stepped out of the apartment.

Behind me, I could hear a surge of reborn ecstasy, almost feel a wavefront of relief, as if a thousand fat matrons had discarded their whalebone corsets simultaneously.



Eight months later, Lorraine and I were married.

Relations never went bad between us. We were always happy at home, when only the two of us were present. Contentment was the rule, for over a year of unruffled domesticity.

But during that same year, I began to lose all my friends. One by one, they fell away from the tree of my life like desiccated autumn leaves. Invitations to dinners, movies, sporting events, parties – they all dried up. One-on-one, my buddies still seemed amiable and unchanged, joshing, confiding, treating me as they always had. But about half a year into my marriage, they all simply stopped inviting Lorraine and me as a couple anywhere. Conversations at work actually became quite awkward.

A co-worker would ask, “Hey, folks – anyone want to catch that concert on Friday with me?”

“Lorraine and I’d love to!”

“Uh, on second thought, I don’t think I can make it myself.”

Affairs finally reached the point where I braced Stan on the subject, one day after work at our favourite bar.

“Stan, I have to know. What does everyone have against me and Lorraine? We’re pariahs! I feel like a goddamn leper. Did we do something so hideous that we’ve fallen into some kind of social black hole?”

Stan studied the depths of his beer as if the Delphic Oracle hid at the bottom of the glass. “No, Mitch, it’s nothing specific I can point a finger at. It’s just, it’s just –” He looked up and caught my gaze. “It’s just that Lorraine’s such a bringdown.”

Out of all the accusations anyone could have levelled against my wife, this was the single one I was completely unprepared for. The charge made no sense at all, given Lorraine’s zesty sociability.

“Hello? Are we talking about the same person here? Lorraine’s the life of any get-together! When everyone else is wearing a long face, she’s got a thousand-watt smile shining. She talks to anyone, acquaintance or stranger. I always feel like a million bucks when I’m with her, and you should too.”

“But nobody else *does*, Mitch. It’s just a fact. No one wanted to admit it at first, but the pattern eventually became too obvious to ignore. Whenever Lorraine shows up, the good times fall to ashes. She’s some kind of – I don’t know – some kind of jinx. It’s like she’s got an invisible albatross tied around her neck – just like that guy at my wedding.”

Mention of this ancient incident snapped a trap in my brain. “You mean that happy stranger we could never identify? I don’t see the connection –”

But I did. Painful as the revelation was, I could no longer deny it. If I were to believe my friend – and the suppressed evidence of many memories – then both Lorraine and that uninvited guest served as some kind of happiness sink, sucking all the ambient joy into themselves. I was immune only because I resided somehow in the sphere of her influence.

Stunned, I stood up from my stool and started to leave.

“Mitch, don’t go. You’re not hurt, are you?”

I was very hurt, in some deep, foreign way I couldn’t

quite identify. Until this moment, I had believed I loved Lorraine deeply. But now I began to fear that what I had identified as love was only some kind of shared spillage from her unnatural ration of happiness.

Bereft of friends, Lorraine and I took to spending a lot of our recreational time in public places: restaurants, coffee-houses and bars. And in these venues I witnessed with growing mute and stifled horror the exact phenomenon that Stan had described.

Whenever Lorraine and I entered a place, the level of joy dropped like a shotgun-blasted duck. It never happened to me alone, either, only when we were together. So it had to be Lorraine who was cursed.

Within me every day from this point two feelings warred: grief and remorse at these impossible disruptions, and a unending surfeit of unwarranted happiness.

And of course, I never said a word about any of this to Lorraine.

How could I? She was always so *happy*. It would have been a crime against nature to shatter that placid lake of tranquillity.

From the first day of our marriage, Lorraine had insisted on having one night out alone every week. I couldn’t object, since I reserved the same right for myself – even more so as our social status deteriorated, and I sought lone relief. Lorraine never really got too specific about these solo excursions of hers. I was led, I now realize, to make vague, unconfirmed assumptions about old girlfriends, hospital visits, spinster aunts, bowling leagues, health club appointments – whatever plausible reason might suit me. Still, how could I possibly protest? Lorraine always returned home at a reasonable hour, fresh as a corsage, no trace of carnal infidelity about her. Her affectionate attitude toward me and her desire for lovemaking remained unaltered. Curiously, though, her homecoming after a night out never brought with it the same degree of happiness I felt when, say, I re-encountered her after a day at the office.

I don’t quite remember now exactly when I resolved to follow her on one of her nights out. I suspect I reached that dire decision after we emptied a Starbucks one night in a quarter of an hour flat. But once the notion had taken root, it soon flowered into action.

The house I trailed Lorraine to that night was an unremarkable suburban homestead, some miles outside the city. Once she had parked, I drove past her as she strode happily up the walkway to the front door. Completely unsuspecting, she never looked back to see me. After parking my own car a block away, I scurried through a series of unfenced backyards printed randomly with oblongs of lights from kitchen windows and TV screens, until I reached the lot that held the house Lorraine had entered.

Shrubs bordered a flagstone patio accessible by sliding glass doors. Curtains were drawn nearly all the way across the doors, but one panel of glass had been drawn back several inches for ventilation. Through this slit I could see a tiny slice of the room – nothing more than a corner of a couch and a seated man’s trousered legs – and hear speech quite plainly.

Drugs. The answer hit me with the force of a punch.

Lorraine had fallen in with a bunch of high-class heroin addicts. But then the absurdity of that easy solution struck me. She exhibited no symptoms of drug use, no needle marks, no cravings, no secret expenditures. And no drug I knew of could explain Lorraine's effect on others.

Without a clue regarding what was about to happen, I settled in behind the foliage and began to concentrate on the conversation. The plummy, clotted voices of those inside the house bespoke a bloated satiation mixed with an undercurrent of still unsatisfied avarice.

A woman said, "Now that Lorraine's here, we can begin. Who'd like to start?"

"I'll share first," said a man. "I have something very piquant for you. Try a taste of this."

A vague sense of happiness leaked out of the house and tickled my mind. The sensation was as familiar as the pleasure I felt in Lorraine's daily presence. Impossibly, horribly, I found myself smiling, despite the rotten atmosphere of corruption I also sensed. Inside, a chorus of *mmms* and *ahhhs* followed the man's proffered "taste." The wordless sighs and moans were almost sexual in tone, yet I was somehow certain that no conventional orgy was in progress.

"Any ideas on the source?" the man asked after the sounds of appreciation had subsided.

"Give us a hint."

"Young."

"Oh, come on now – anyone could tell *that* much!"

"Well, how about young and outdoors?"

"A kid flying his first kite?"

Now Lorraine spoke. Her voice held that same note of jaded anticipation. "I sense the sea."

"Exactly, Lorraine! What a nose! I snatched a toddler's first dip in the ocean! You should have seen his mommy and daddy wondering why he wasn't more excited!"

Laughter greeted this telling detail, and I felt the gorge rise in my throat.

Now began the trading in earnest of stolen happy hours, pilfered from their rightful perceivers.

The audience at a circus when the clowns tumbled out. The viewer of a sunset as the clouds began to burn. The author of a book typing a period at the end of the final sentence. The winner of a footrace as the tape broke against her chest. The new owners of Detroit's latest model as the dealer handed them the keys. The parents gazing through a maternity ward's windows. The student receiving a higher grade than expected. The bum finding a quarter in the gutter. The politician winning a legislative victory. Lovers in bed.

Serially, like gourmets at a leisurely wine-tasting, the happiness vampires exchanged stored samples of other people's joy.

And I, outside in my hiding place, experiencing the merest inebriatory edges of this awful communion, wanted only to vomit.

At the same time I admitted a growing unmasterable desire for more.

After an unknown interval guiltily swallowing the crumbs from the thieves' table, I finally tore myself away.

When Lorraine entered our living room that night with a big "Hi!", I did not greet her in turn, but instead asked her a single question.

Someone else might have demanded, "How could you?" or "What are you?" But I only said, "Are you happy, dear?"

"Of course."

"That's too bad."

My hands were around her throat before she knew what was happening.

As I throttled her, I began to weep at the imminent death of all I had loved.

And to laugh with manic joy.

For in a reflex of survival, Lorraine poured out at me all the charge of exuberant stolen hours she still retained.

This close, the recorded sensations hit me like the blast from a firehose.

I was a horse eating my hard-earned oats, and a dog having its stomach scratched. I was a kid playing hooky, and scientist tabulating ground-breaking research. I sailed a yacht on gleaming waters, and piloted a plane I had built for myself. I roared at a touchdown, and hit a brilliant serve across the court. I was a supermodel on the catwalk, and a monk in my cell. Glory and exaltation burnt down my nerves like fire down a fuse.

But my grip on my wife's throat never slackened.

I knew she was dead when the happiness stopped.

When I left our home for good, Lorraine's corpse sprawled across the rug, I took nothing but my wallet. At a gas station outside the city I filled my car's tank, as well as a jerrycan.

The front door of the house where the happiness vampires had convened had been left ajar, even though it was 3AM. Despite intact furnishings, the house radiated a deserted feeling, and I knew no one would be returning. Its owners, with their greater sensitivities, must have felt Lorraine's dying burst all the way from the city, and fled, the coven scattering to new identities, new haunts, new victims.

I torched the place anyway.

And then I fled too, with nothing left to me forever, except the American dream.

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

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**Paul Di Filippo** has published numerous books in recent years, including the novel *Ciphers* (1997), and the collections *The Steampunk Trilogy* (1995), *Ribofunk* (1996), *Fractal Paisleys* (1997) and *Lost Pages* (1998). He also writes collaborative crime novels with Michael Bishop, as "Philip Lawson." He lives in Providence, Rhode Island, and his most recent story here was the excellent "Angelmakers" (issue 141).



# The Marriage of SKY & Sea

Chris Beckett

“They say,” mused Clancy, looking down on a planet enmeshed by strands of light, “that Cosmopolis is the city on which the sun never sets. It’s true because the city encircles an entire planet. But in any case sunrise and sunset are an irrelevance in Cosmopolis because there is *no one watching*. The city’s inhabitants live in absorbing worlds of their own construction and have no attention to spare for that rather bare space under the sky which they call, dismissively, the *surface*.”

Here he paused.

“Have we finished dictation for now?” enquired Com.

“Wait,” said Clancy.

Com waited. Having no limbs, Com had no choice. Its smooth yellow egg-shape fitted comfortably into Clancy’s hand.

“I am a writer and a traveller,” continued Clancy, reclining on cushions in a small dome-shaped room, its ceiling a hemisphere of stars. “I am a typical Cosmopolitan soul in many ways, restless, unable to settle, hungry for experience, hungry to feed the gap where love

and meaning should be.”

He considered.

“No. Delete that last sentence. And I’ve had a change of heart about our destination. Instruct Sphere to head for the Aristotle Complex. There are several worlds out there which I’ve been meaning to check out.”

Com did as it was asked in a three-microsecond burst of ultrasound.

“Message received and implemented,” said Sphere to Com, in the same high-speed code. “Shall I send standard notification?”

“Did you wish to notify anyone in the city about your new destination?” Com asked Clancy.

“Hmm,” said Clancy, with an odd smile, “that’s an interesting question. And the answer, interestingly, is no. Take another note, Com, for the book.”

He leant back with his hands behind his head.

“Ten thousand kilometres out,” he dictated, “I changed my destination so no one could find me if anything went wrong. I wanted to disappear. I wanted to dispense with

the safety net, to get a sense of what it must have been like for those settlers in the fourth millennium, setting out on their one-way journey out into the unknown."

He considered, then shrugged.

"Right, Com. At this point add a chapter about the Aristotle Complex. What we know of the early settlers, their motives, their desire to escape from decadence... and so on. Themes: finality, no turning back, taking risks, a complete break with the past."

"Neo-romantic style?"

"Neo-romantic stroke factual hard-boiled. Oh and include three poetic sharp-edge sentences. Just three. Low adjective count."

"Okay. Shall I read it through to you?" said Com, having composed a chapter of 2,000 words without causing a gap in the conversation.

"Not now," said Clancy. "I'm not in the mood. Get me a dinner fixed will you, and something to watch on screen. How long will it be till we reach the Complex?"

"The distance is about five parsecs. It'll take three days."

It was not the first voyage of this kind that Clancy had made. This was his career. He travelled alone to the "lost worlds," he got to know them: their way of life, their myths, their beliefs. And then he returned with a book.

Returning with the book was his particular trademark. The completed book went on sale, in electronic form, at the *exact* same moment that he stepped out of his sphere. It had become a publishing event. He sold a million within an hour and became the city's most talked-about celebrity. The literary spaceman: brave, elegant, alone. He attended all the most fashionable parties. He invariably embarked on a love affair with at least one beautiful and brilliant woman.

And when the love affair grew cold – as it always did, for there was a certain emptiness where his heart should be – and when he sensed that he had reached the end of the city's fickle concentration span, he would go off once more into space.

He had a fear of being trapped, of being tied down, of becoming ordinary.

"The first approach to a settled planet," said Clancy, "is a uniquely humbling experience. Here are human beings whose ancestors have gone about their lives without any reference to the universe outside for 30 generations. Invariably, in the absence of the vast pyramid of infrastructure on which modern society rests, their technology has become very basic. Invariably the story of their origins has been compacted into some legend. They have had more practical things to worry about for the last thousand years. My arrival, however it is managed, is inevitably a cultural bombshell. Their lives will never be the same again."

He considered. They had reached the Aristotle Complex an hour ago. Sphere was now using the short cut of non-Euclidean space to leap from star to star and planet to planet, looking for inhabited worlds, very quickly but mechanically, like Com searching the *Cosmopolitan Encyclopedia* for a single word.

"Some say that for this reason I should not disturb them. This is surely poppycock. On that argument no human being would ever visit another's home, no one would talk to another, let alone take the risk of love. Not that I ever *do* take that risk of course."

He frowned. "Delete that last sentence."

"Deleted. Sphere has found an inhabited planet."

A fisher king was fishing in his watery world when the sphere came through the sky. Standing in the prow of his fine longboat, the tall, bearded upright king watched a silver ball, like a tiny, immaculate moon, descending towards his island home. And his household warriors, sitting at their oars, groaned and muttered, watching the sphere and then turning to look at him to see what he would do.

Aware of their gaze and never once faltering as he played his hereditary role, he ordered them to cut away the nets and row at once for the shore.

When Clancy emerged, his sphere perched on its tripod legs on the top of a tall headland, it was mainly women and children who were standing round him. Most of the men were out at sea.

He smiled.

"I won't harm you," he said, "I want to be your friend."

The words didn't matter much of course. After all this time these fisher-people had evolved a completely new language. It was salty as seaweed, full of the sound of water.

"Iglop!" they said. "Waarsha sleesh!"

Clancy smiled again. They were pleasant-looking people, healthy-looking and well fed. Men and women alike went bare from the waist up, and wore kilts of some seal-like skin.

"Sky!" said Clancy pointing upwards.

"Sea!" (he pointed) "Man!"

It took them a while to grasp the game, but then they did so with gusto, drawing closer to the strange man in his rainbow clothes, and to his strange silvery globe.

"Eyes," said Clancy. "Nose. Mouth."

"Erlash," they called out. "Memaarsha. Vroom."

Hidden in Clancy's pocket, Com took all this in, comparing every utterance with its database of the language of the settlers before they set out a thousand years ago.

Com knew that there are regularities in the way that languages change. Sounds migrate together across the palate like flocks of birds. Meanings shift over the spectrum from particular to general, concrete to abstract, in orderly and measurable ways. Com formed 5,000 hypotheses a second, tested each one, discarded most, elaborated a few. By the time the fisher king arrived with his warriors and his long robe, Com was already able to have a go at translating.

It was as the king approached that Clancy first became really aware of the massive presence of the moon.

"I was on a rocky promontory of the island. Beyond the excited faces, beyond the approaching king, was a glittering blue sea dotted with dozens of other islands. But all this was dwarfed by the immense pink cratered



sphere above, filling up a tenth part of the entire sky.

"What is our moon in Cosmopolis? A faint smudge in the orange gloom above a ventilation shaft? A pale blotch behind the rooftop holograms? We glance up and notice it for a moment, briefly entertained perhaps by the thought that there is a world of sorts outside our own, and then turn our attention back to our more engrossing surroundings.

"But this was truly a celestial sphere, a gigantic ball of rock, hanging above us, dominating the sky. I had known of its size before I landed but nothing could have prepared me for the sight of it.

"I had yet to experience the titanic ocean tides, the palpable gravity shifts, the daily solar eclipses, but I knew this was a world ruled over by its moon."

Clancy paused and took a sip of red wine, seated comfortably in his impregnable sphere where he had retired, as was his custom, for the night. He had declined an invitation to dine with the King, saying that he would do the feast more justice the following evening. The truth was the first encounter was always extremely tiring and he needed rest. And alien food always played havoc with his digestion the first time round, guaranteeing a sleepless night.

"Com," he said, "prepare me a database of lunar myths."

He considered.

"And one on lunar poetry, and one on references to unusual moons round other inhabited worlds."

"Done. Do you want me to...?"

"No, carry on with dictation."

"The King is a genuinely impressive individual. His voice, his posture, his sharp grey eyes, everything about him speaks of his supreme self-assurance. He has absolutely no doubt at all about either his right or his ability to be in charge. And why should he? As he himself calmly told us, he is the descendant of an ancient union between sky and sea. He greeted me as a long-lost cousin..."

Clancy hesitated. A shadow crossed his mind.

"I pin them out like fucking butterflies!" he exclaimed. "I dissect them and pin them out! Why can't I let anything just live?"

Com was sensitive to emotional fluctuations and recognized this one, not from the *inside* of course but from the outside, as a pattern it had observed before.

"The first day is always extremely tiring," Com suggested gently. "In the past we've found that a cortical relaxant, a warm drink and sleep..."

"Yes, whatever we do, let's not face the emptiness," growled Clancy, but he seemed to acquiesce at first, collecting the pill and the drink dispensed by Sphere, and preparing to settle into the bed that unfolded from the floor...

Then "No!" he exclaimed, tossing the pill aside. "If I can't feel at least I can fucking think. Come on, Com, let's do some work on the theme. Listen, I have an idea..."

Lying with two of his concubines in his bed of animal skins, the fisher king was also kept awake by a hectic stream of thoughts. His mind was no less quick than Clancy's but it worked in a very different way. Clancy thought like an acrobat, a tightrope walker, nimbly balancing above the void. But the king moved between large

solid chunks of certainty. Annihilation was an external threat to be fought off, not an existential hole inside.

He thought of the power of the strange prince in his sphere. He thought about his own sacred bloodline and the kingdom which sustained it. All his life he had deftly managed threats from other island powers, defeating some in war, making allies of others through exchanges of gifts or slaves, or bonds of marriage. But how to play a visitor who came not from across the sea in the longboat but down from the sky in a kind of silver moon?

He woke one of the concubines. (He was a widower and had never remarried).

"Fetch me my chamberlain. I want to take his advice!"

"There are three kinds of knowledge," Clancy said, "let's call them Deep Knowledge, Slow Knowledge and Quick Knowledge. Deep Knowledge is the stuff which has been hardwired into our brains by evolution itself; the stuff we are born with, the stuff that animals have. It changes in the light of experience, like other knowledge, but only over millions of years. Slow Knowledge is the accumulation of traditions and traditional techniques passed down from generation to generation. It too changes, evolving gradually as some traditions fade and others are slowly elaborated. But, at the conscious level, those who transmit Slow Knowledge see themselves not as innovators but as preservers of wisdom from the past. Quick knowledge is the short cut we have latterly acquired in the form of science, a way of speeding up the trial-and-error process by making it systematic and self-conscious. It is a thousand, a million times quicker than Slow Knowledge, and a billion, billion times speedier than Deep Knowledge. But unlike them it works by objectivity, by stepping *outside* a thing.

"Deep, Slow and Quick: we could equate them to rock and sea and air. Rock doesn't move perceptibly at all. Sea moves but stays within its bounds..."

He laughed, "More wine, Com, this is *good*. Get this: Cosmopolitans are creatures of air, analytical, empirical, technological; lost-worlders are typically creatures of the sea. They all are, but these guys here are literally so. So here's the book title: *The Meeting of Sea and Sky*. See? It ties in with the king's origin myth!"

"That was a *marriage* of sea and sky," observed Com.

Clancy had retired for the night atop a headland overlooking a wide bay, where a coastal village of wattle huts squatted near the water's edge. But in the morning there was no sea in sight. A plain of mud and rocks and pools stretched as far as the horizon and groups of tiny figures could be seen wandering all over it with baskets on their backs.

The moon was on the far side of the planet, taking the ocean with it. The sky was open and blue. And when he climbed down the steps (watched by a small crowd which had been waiting there since dawn) Clancy found that he was appreciably heavier than he had been the previous day.

Followed closely by the fascinated crowd – made up mainly of children and old people – Clancy went down from the headland to what had been the bay. A group of

women were just coming off the mud flats with their baskets laden with shellfish. He smiled at them and started to walk out himself onto the mud.

Behind him came gasps and stifled incredulous laughs. Clancy stopped.

"Is there a problem?" Clancy had Com ask. (Everyone was diverted for a while by the wondrous talking egg). "Is there some danger that I should be aware of?"

"No, no danger," they answered.

But why then the amazement? Why the laughter? They stared, incredulous.

"Because you are a *man*." someone burst out at length.

Clancy was momentarily nonplussed, then he gave a little laugh of recognition.

"I've got it, Com. Their reaction is *exactly* the one I would get if I headed into the women's toilets in some shopping mall."

He addressed the crowd.

"So men don't go on the mud when the tide is out?"

People laughed more easily now, certain that he was merely teasing them.

"These things are different where I come from," said Clancy. "You're telling me that only women here go out on the mud?"

A very old woman came forward.

"Only women of course. That is a woman's realm. Surely that is obvious?"

"And a man's realm is where?"

The woman was irritated, feeling he was making a fool of her.

"To men belongs the sea under the moon," she snapped, withdrawing back into the crowd.

"Sea and sky, sea and sky," muttered Clancy to Com, "it's coming together nicely."

The book was the thing for him. Reality was simply the raw material.

That night the king piled the choicest pieces of meat on Clancy's plate and filled his mug again and again with a thick brew of fermented seaweed. Clancy's stomach groaned in anticipation of a night of struggling to unlock the unfamiliar proteins of an alien biological line, but he acted the appreciative guest, telling tales of Cosmopolis and other worlds, and listening politely as the king's poets sang in praise of their mighty lord, the "moon-tall whale-slayer, gatherer of islands, favoured son of sky and sea."

As he lay in the early hours, trying to get rest if not actual sleep, Clancy became aware of a new sound coming from outside – a creaking, snapping sound – and he got up to investigate.

He emerged from his sphere to an astonishing sight. Over at the eastern horizon, the enormous moon was rising over a returning sea. Brilliant turbulent water, luminous with pink moonlight, was sweeping towards him across the vast dark space where the women had yesterday hunted for crabs.

But the creaking, snapping sound was much nearer to hand.

"What *is* that?" Clancy asked.

The king had posted a warrior as guard-of-honour to Clancy's sphere and the man was now sleepily scrambling to his feet.

"What is that sound?" Clancy asked him, holding out Com, his yellow egg.

The sound was so ordinary to the man that he could not immediately understand what it was that Clancy meant. Then he shrugged.

"It's the moon tugging at the rocks."

"Of *course*," exclaimed Clancy, "of course. With a moon that size, even the rocks have tides that can be felt."

He walked to the edge of the headland. He heard another creaking below him and a little stone dislodged itself and rattled down the precipice.

"Lunar erosion," he observed with a smile.

The warrior had come up beside him.

"It tugs at your soul too," he volunteered. "Makes you long for things which you don't even know what they are. No wonder the women stay indoors under the moon. It tugs and tugs and if you're not careful, it'll pull your soul right out of you and you'll be another ghost up there in that dead dry place and never again know the sea and the solid land."

Having made this speech, the young man nodded firmly and wandered back to his post at the foot of Clancy's steps.

"Wow," breathed Clancy, "good stuff! Did you record all that?"

Of course Com had.

The moon had nearly cleared the horizon now. It towered above the world. The wattle huts below were bathed in its soft pink light and the water once more filled up the bay.

"Take a note, Com. I said we in Cosmopolis had forgotten our moon, but actually I think our moon has gobbled us up. After so many centuries of asking for the moon, we have..."

"...we have...?"

"Forget it. I think I'm going to be sick."

"I visited a quarry," Clancy dictated, a week into his stay, "a little dry dusty hollow at the island's heart, where half a dozen men were facing and stacking stone. It was the middle of the day but quite dark, due to one of the innumerable eclipses, so they were working by the light of whale-oil flares. The chief quarryman was a short, leathery fellow in a leather apron, his hands white with rock dust. I asked him why he worked there rather than on the sea like most of the other men. He had some difficulty understanding what I was asking him at first, then shrugged and said his father had worked there, and his grandfather and great-grandfather. It was his family's allotted role. (A *slow knowledge* approach to life, you see, a *sea knowledge* approach. Any Cosmopolitan would want to demonstrate that his job was chosen by himself.)

"But I realized that my question had left the man with some anxiety about how he was perceived. He stood there, this funny, leathery human mole, and stared intently at my face for a full minute as if there was writing there which he was trying to read.

"It isn't on the sea," he said at length, 'but it's real moon work! No women are ever allowed here.' And he



told me that there were some rocks they only attempted to shift right under the moon. The strain of the tide going through the rock made the strata more brittle. Hit the rock in the right place under the moon and it would suddenly snap. Hit it any other time and it remained stubbornly hard. With some rocks, he said, it is enough to heat the rocks with fire when the moon is up, and they fly apart into blocks. It was real moon work all right.

"So I told him that I had no doubts whatever about his manhood."

Clancy paused.

"You know, Com, I think we've got nearly enough material already. We just need one more episode, one more *event* to somehow bring the themes alive. Whatever 'alive' is."

He got up, paced around the tiny space of Sphere's leisure room.

"What is the point of all this? Back and forth across empty space, belonging nowhere, an outsider in the lost worlds, an outsider in Cosmopolis, no one for company but a plastic egg. What are my books but mental wallpaper?"

Com conferred with Sphere by ultrasound, then suggested a glass of wine.

Clancy snorted. "You and Sphere always want to pour chemicals down me, don't you? Come on, back to work. Resume dictation."

Next day when the tide was out, Clancy got into conversation with a harpooneer, a sly, sinuous, thin-faced man, with two fingers missing from an encounter with one of the big whale-like creatures which he hunted under every moon.

As with the quarryman, Clancy asked the man why he did the work he did, and received exactly the same answer: his father, grandfather and great-grandfather had done the same. Then Clancy asked him would he not like to have a choice of profession?

When Com translated, the man did not seem to understand.

"I know the word for choice in the context, say, of selecting a fish from a pile," Com explained to Clancy, "But it does not seem to be meaningful to use this word in the context of a person's occupation."

"Okay," said Clancy, "ask him like this. Ask him does he prefer his ale salty or sweet? Ask him whether he prefers whale meat fresh or dried? Ask him does he prefer to fish when the sun is hot or when it is cloudy? Then ask him, how would it be if someone had said to him when he was a child, would he rather be a quarryman, a harpooneer or a fisherman with nets?"

Com tried this. The old man replied to each question until the last. Then he burst out laughing.

"They simply have no concept of choosing their own way in life," Clancy recorded later. "They follow the role allotted to them by birth and don't resent it because it has not occurred to any of them that anything else could be a possibility. How would they react if they could come to the city, and see people who have chosen even their own gender, changed their size, their skin, the colour of their eyes?"

He considered.

"There is something idyllic about their position. In some respects, in any case, they are spared the burden of Free Will. Even marriage partners, I gather, are allocated according to complicated rules to do with clan and status, with no reference whatever to individual choice. I see no evidence that people here are less happy than in our city. In fact a certain kind of *fretfulness*, found everywhere in the city, is totally missing here, even though life is certainly not easy for those allocated the roles of slave, say, or concubine or witch..."

He considered this. Com waited.

"It is this idyll of an ordered, simple life (isn't it?) which the city pays me so well to seek out. Not that anyone wants it for themselves. This life would bore any Cosmopolitan to death in a week. But they like to know it is there, like childhood..."

"By the way, one new thing the harpooneer told me. He asked me when I would meet the king's daughters. I told him I didn't know the king had daughters and he laughed and said there were three, and no one could agree which was the most beautiful."

Clancy dined that evening on the high table in the hall of the king, with all the king's warriors ranged on benches below. In the middle of the room the carcass of an entire whale was being turned on a spit by household slaves. The whole space was full of the great beast's meaty, fatty heat.

"*Wahita wahiteh zloosh*," chanted the king's poets on and on, "*wamineh weyopla droosh!*..."

Clancy leant towards the king.

"Your majesty, I am told that you have three very beautiful daughters. I hope I will have the pleasure of meeting them."

The effect of this on the king was unexpectedly electrifying. He jolted instantaneously into his most formal mode – and, seeing this, the entire hall full of warriors fell suddenly silent.

"Prince from the sky, I am most honoured that you should ask. They will be made ready at once."

He called to a servant, gave urgent orders and dismissed him with an imperious wave. The warriors began their talking and their shouting once again.

"An hour passed," Clancy dictated later, "and then a second. The warriors grew restless, wriggling on their benches like naughty children. The whale carcass, what was left of it, grew cold. The king and I, whose relationship consisted entirely of exchanging information, ran out of things to say to each other, and he eventually gave up all attempt at conversation, sinking into his thoughts, turning a gold ring round and round on his finger, and from time to time jolting himself awake and pressing more sea-weed ale on me.

"I began to wonder whether there had been some mistake. Surely it could not take that long for the princesses to be made ready? Had they been summoned from some other island? Had I perhaps completely misunderstood what was going on? But Com assured me that, yes, the king had said his daughters were being got ready.

"Another hour passed. I endured the king's poets repeating their repertoire for the third time. (*Wahita wahiteh*

zloosh / wamineh weyopla droosh!...' repeated after every one of 23 verses!)

"And then a door opened at the end of the dais, all the warriors lumbered to their feet, and the king's three daughters were led in."

At this point in his narration, Clancy asked for wine. Sphere poured it for him.

"The harpooneer had not lied to me, all three princesses were indeed beautiful and it wasn't hard now to see why they had taken so long. Their hair was plaited, ribboned and piled in elaborate structures on their heads, their bodies, bare to the waist, had been freshly painted in the most intricate designs of entwined sea plants and sea creatures.

"They came round the table and knelt behind my seat, the youngest first, her sisters behind. Then, at a word from the king, the youngest daughter stood up, offered her hand to me briefly and went to stand behind him. The second daughter did the same. And then the third, the oldest..."

Clancy gulped down his wine and went across to the dispenser for more. He was agitated, scared.

"What the hell is that feeling?" he demanded. "It's not like lust at all, but you can't call it love, not when you don't know the person. It's like a buried longing for some kind of *sweetness*, which we try to stifle beneath worldliness and weariness and all the busy pointless tasks we lay upon ourselves. And suddenly a person touches it for some reason and it erupts, all focused on that one person, her lovely sad intelligent eyes, her unconscious grace..."

He checked himself.

"What a load of crap! What do I know about her except her face? What is it I want from that face? What can a face give me? What is a face except muscle and skin? Damn it, it means nothing, nothing! It's all just a trick played on us by biology!"

"Are we still doing dictation?" Com politely enquired.

"No of course we aren't, you plastic prat!"

Clancy swallowed the wine in one gulp and shoved the empty cup straight back into the dispenser for more.

"Okay, let's admit it. The oldest daughter, Wayeesha. When I met her eyes it felt as if something passed between us, some recognition, some hope that it might not always be necessary to be so... so terribly alone. It's all crap, of course: she's not much more than half my age, she's been brought up to marry some iron age warlord on some bleak little island. We don't even speak the same language."

He downed the third cup of wine in one, with a little shudder.

"All that we might possibly have in common is some kind of longing to *escape*..."

"Sometimes it helps to talk about what happened," said Com, after a ten-microsecond conference with Sphere. "Perhaps if you finished the story..."

"Oh for God's say spare me your second-hand wisdom you sanctimonious *rattle*!" exclaimed Clancy.

But in spite of that he sat down again and carried on.

"So then when all three women were standing behind the king's chair, he smiled proudly at me and asked me whether or not they were indeed as beautiful as people had told me. Of course I said yes.

"That's good," he said, "and now the choice is entirely yours."

"I suppose I had been rather naïve, but until that point, I hadn't understood that when I asked to see his daughters he had assumed that I wanted one of them for a wife."

Again Clancy jumped to his feet.

"Damn it, Com, this is intolerable. One minute I was falling for a woman in a way that seemed scary and new to me, the very next minute I was being offered her hand in marriage. How could *anyone* deal with that? I played for time, of course. I said that in my own world a man sleeps on a decision like that... Delete that whole paragraph. You rewrite it. Leave out the nonsense about my personal feelings. Just describe her as very attractive and tempting. Generic rather than personal. Worldly rather than sentimental. Low adjective count."

"Done. Shall I read it back to you?"

"Later... It's maddening. This is *precisely* the event I needed to bring the book together. The marriage of sky and sea! The space traveller falls in love with the daughter of a fisher king. What could be better! *Damn! Damn!* Why has reality always got to be so awkward."

"Go on," said Com, who was a good listener.

"I mean it might make a good book, but if I marry her I can't just go back to the city with the book, can I? I have to go back with *her*. How would it look if I bring back some kid half my age who doesn't even know how to read or write? I'll look like a dirty old man."

"Don't forget," said Com, who had filed and indexed everything they'd learnt about the local culture, "that here it is the man who moves to live with the woman. Women are not allowed to cross the sea."

"So I couldn't take her back with me? Yes, that's true. And if a marriage fails here a man returns to his own island doesn't he?"

Clancy sat down, picked up the yellow egg and turned it over in his hands.

"You may look like a kid's rattle, Com, but you have your uses. I could marry her here, and if things didn't work out, which of course they won't after a while, I can take off home. No harm done, a lovely honeymoon, and a nice sad end for the story. Sky and sea try to marry, but in the end they just don't mix. Spaceman has to be free, even at the price of loneliness and alienation. Ocean princess has to be with her people..."

Then he frowned. He was very cold and empty inside, but not wholly without scruples. He was concerned, at any rate, with how his actions might be seen.

"But that is just using her, isn't it? I can't do that. My readers wouldn't like it. They don't expect me to be an angel, but they do expect a certain... integrity. Damn."

He thought for a while.

"And anyway she is so beautiful, and so sad. I don't want to..."

A thought occurred to him.

"By the way, I meant to ask you. When she shook my hand she said something, very quietly, so no one else could hear. What was it?"

"*Eesha zhu moosha* – you have my heart. Do you want me to play it back as she said it?"

"No!" Clancy jumped up as if he had been stung. He was shaking with fear.

"Oh all right," he whispered, shrinking back down, as if in anticipation of a blow, "go on, play it back."

When he had heard it, he wept: just two tears, but tears all the same, such as he hadn't shed for years.

"Damn it, Com, I'll do it. In this culture marriage is all *about* using people. It won't do her any harm to have been married to the sky man! I'm going to bloody do it. Do it and be damned for once."

He glared at the yellow egg as if it had questioned his action.

"Don't worry," he said, "I'll make the book come out right somehow."

Down in the wattle-and-daub settlement the fisher king had a lookout post beside his hall. It consisted of two tree-trunks fixed cleverly end to end, with a small crows'-nest at the top. He invited Clancy up there on the night before the wedding to watch as the other grooms arrived from across the sea.

Weddings in the sea-world were communal affairs, taking place on a single day just once a year. Bonfires burned all along the beach. Under a huge half-moon that dwarfed the island and made the sea itself seem small, canoes appeared in the distance among the glittering waves, first of all as faint dark smudges and then gradually growing more distinct as they approached the land and the firelight. Each one was cheered as it approached and, as they drew close to the beach, the king's warriors waded out into the sea to greet the new arrivals and help to drag the boats ashore.

Clancy turned to the king and smiled. It was a magnificent spectacle.

The king laughed.

"And now," he said, "the burning of the boats."

He raised his arms and gave a signal to his followers on the beach, who at once set to, dragging the canoes one after another onto the fires. The grooms objected ritually and had to be ritually restrained, but there was a lot of laughter. It was clearly all in fun.

Clancy frowned.

"Why do you do that?"

"When a man marries, his wandering days should end, isn't that so?"

The king winked.

"That moon-boat of yours, it won't burn quite so easily!"

"What do you mean?"

Clancy looked over to the headland where Sphere was perched on its tripod legs. A fire was burning beneath it.

"No!" he cried out, and then laughed at himself. How could mere fire harm a vessel designed to cope with space?

The king laughed good-naturedly with him, putting a friendly arm round the shoulders of his son-in-law to be.

"Those rocks are easily shattered under the moon," he observed, "and we have fires in the caves below as well."

When he heard Com translate this, it took Clancy a few seconds before he grasped the implications – and in that short time the first boulder had broken loose and crashed down into the sea.

"No," Clancy shouted, "it's my only way back!"

The king roared with laughter.

"I'm not joking!" cried Clancy, looking around for the rope ladder to get down. "Have the fires put out at once!"

Over on the headland a second boulder crashed down, then a third. And then the sphere itself tipped over, its surfaces glinting in the pink moonlight as it rolled onto its back, its tripod legs sticking up in the air as if it was a stranded sheep. Some more rocks exploded. In agonizing slow-motion, or so it seemed, Sphere went over the edge, crashing against the cliff – once... twice... – then hitting the sea with a mighty splash and sinking beneath the waves.

With one foot on the rope ladder, Clancy stared. And the king, still laughing, his face wet with tears, reached down, helped him kindly back onto the platform and gave him a warm, fishy hug.

"The boats are burnt! So now you can go to Wayeesha."

Clancy walked over to the rough wooden rail at the edge of the platform, looked out at the bonfires, the glittering sea, the giant moon, and remembered Wayeesha waiting for him in the hall below.

As he had trained himself to do in even the most extreme situations, he examined his thoughts. What he found surprised him. He turned to the king with a smile.

"I'm going to regret this. And I fear that you, my friend, are going to be seriously disappointed. But right now, it's strange, I feel as if I've put down a burden. I don't think I've ever felt so *free*!"

"A good ending for the book!" Com observed.

"What book, you idiot?" said Clancy. "Are we going to write it on seaweed, or carve it into the stones?"

Then he proffered the yellow egg to the king.

"Here," he said, "it's yours. I don't need it, and I feel you ought to get *something* from your alliance with the stars. No need to translate that last sentence, Com."

"Is this wise?" asked Com, as the king turned it over reverently in his large hands.

"No," said Clancy. "In another month your battery will run out and you really *will* just be a plastic egg. Then what will the king think of my gift?"

He went to the rope ladder and began to lower himself, carefully avoiding looking down.

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**Chris Beckett**, a former social worker now teaching in Cambridge, is the author of eight previous stories in *Interzone*, the most recent of which was "Valour" (issue 141). That last story has been taken by David G. Hartwell for reprinting in his *Best SF of the Year* anthology (an earlier *IZ* story by Chris, "La Macchina," was similarly selected by another leading U.S. anthologist, Gardner Dozois, for *The Year's Best SF*).



Among the 1,998 people on Britain's overstuffed New Year honours list were Julie Andrews (*Mary Poppins*; now a Dame), Malcolm Bradbury (some borderline sf, e.g. *Rates of Exchange*; knighted), Sean Connery (many sf films; knighted), Doris Lessing (unashamed sf novels, 1987 Worldcon GOH; Companion of Honour), Ian McEwan (who rated an *SF Encyclopedia* entry; CBE), Liam Neeson (acted in some movie; OBE), Michael Palin (sf/fantasy in Python movies; OBE), Dave Prowse (Darth Whatsisname; MBE), and Anne Wood (oh God, she invented the Teletubbies; CBE).

## THE PEN AND THE DARK

**Douglas Adams** has withdrawn his claim of not writing sf. Over the radio in January he admitted that he'd *tried* not to write sf, but robots and spaceships still kept creeping in....

**Arthur C. Clarke**, who keeps insisting the new millennium isn't until 2001, surely won't accept a penny in royalties for the 1999 reworking of his 1961 *Profiles of the Future* – which Gollancz have wickedly subtitled "Millennium Edition."

**Ellen Datlow** is cheerful again despite the suspension of *Event Horizon*: she's now been hired as fiction editor of Scifi.com, the Sci Fi Channel's website, formerly called The Dominion.

**Mike Moorcock's** "Nomads of the Time Streams" fan club preserved deadly secrecy about *moorcock@60.com*, a 60th-birthday presentation volume with 60 contributors which was thrust upon the great man at his celebration party.

**Alison Spedding**, still serving that 10-year drugs sentence in Bolivia, is in poor health, losing blood daily, and suspects she may have cancer. The prison refuses to allow the comprehensive in-patient testing wanted by the hospital. British consular officials will request a pardon only in cases of terminal illness, but – *Catch-22* – no testing means no diagnosis. (Prisoners Abroad, 020 7833 3467.)

**Michael Swanwick** was bitten by That Bug before the New Year – with a summons for US jury duty, directing him to report on January 3, 1900. Meanwhile, hot Hugo news: "Just in time for Christmas Eve, a package arrived with the award – or, rather, the Hugo kit, for, like a tricycle, some assembly was required. The orange model of Ayers Rock was chipped and the base was scratched, from having spent four months in the trunk of somebody's car. But what did I care? It

## ANSIBLE LINK



## DAVID LANGFORD

was a Hugo! Then I saw that the plaque had been made out to 'Michael Swanwick'... I think the moral here is clear: never win a Hugo in a country where they've never heard of you."

**Bryan Talbot** gloated uncontrollably as he took delivery of a special treat on solstice day: "a keg of real ale, just in time for Xmas. This is the strangest royalty payment I've ever had." A guest ale called "Up in Smoke" turned up in a local pub, with the label design featuring Chester P. Hackenbush the Psychedelic Alchemist from *Brainstorm Comics*, Bryan's first underground work from the 70s. Contacting the brewery and mentioning who owned the copyright led to payment in kind. In 2000, the same brewers are starting a line of bottled beer, with a serious possibility of a *Heart of Empire* brew, using the comics series logo as the label...

## INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**Publishers and Sinners.** *Richard Curtis* of US Curtis Agency fame launched his E-reads.com imprint in January, with 2,000-odd titles – mostly out-of-print published work, including much sf – in electronic and print-on-demand formats. He hopes that tight editorial screening will attract readers who have conspicuously not flocked to the web sites that publish virtually anything (for a fee). A 5,000-title list is expected by the end of the year.

**2000 AD**, home of Judge Dredd, decided after "about 20 minutes" of millennial deliberation not to update itself to *3000 AD*.

**Pirates of the Web.** The *SF Encyclopedia* team was alarmed when the entire second edition – in fact the 1995 CD-ROM update – turned up on a web site in Estonia. Also present

was much copyright sf, including *Chocky*, *Neuromancer* and all Douglas Adams's novels. A grumble to the site's apparent owner, a department of Tartu University, led to the naughty pages being made inaccessible... but at last sight the actual culprit, one Jaak Parik (who apparently designed the university site), was still flaunting his bootleg fiction though not the *Encyclopedia* at <http://jp.bumpclub.ee/5.html>. M'learned friends observe that Estonia signed the Berne Convention in 1994.

**R.I.P. John Archer**, actor and radio announcer best known for introducing the 1940s *The Shadow* – "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows" – died on 5 December aged 84. He also played the lead role in *Destination Moon* (1950). *Joseph Heller* (1923-1999), whose unforgettably black wartime farce *Catch-22* (1961) influenced sf without being sf, died of a heart attack on 12 December. He was 76. *Madeline Kahn*, of *Blazing Saddles* fame, whose most notable sf performance was in *Young Frankenstein*, died from ovarian cancer on 3 December; she was 57. *Desmond Llewellyn*, the 85-year-old actor who played gadgeteer "Q" in 17 James Bond movies, died after a head-on car crash when driving to a book signing on 19 December. *Ludek Pesek* (1919-1999), astronomical artist of popularity second only to Chesley Bonestell's, died of a heart attack in Zurich on 4 December. *Keith Forbes Scott* (1920-1999), Canadian author of several short sf stories, died in Toronto on 17 November.

**Thog's Masterclass.** "A silence descended like steel doors slamming down around the room." (James P. Hogan, *Voyage from Yesteryear*, 1982) *Dept of Hello Sailor!* "His hands began to probe [the lady] more fiercely. / No, not that way. She required the same delicate, experienced touch as the sails and the tiller of the *Pegeen*." (Andrew M. Greeley, *Ascent Into Hell*, 1983) *Dept of Low-Slung Cheeks*: "The tears burned his cheeks as they ran down under his shirt collar." (James Patterson, *Cat & Mouse*, 1997) "I fought free of her clenches, and now the only thing between she and I, is an unfilled coffin. And this Lamona, whom once I loved, is now an irksome creature, and as she stalks about the open bier, my love is consumed by the horror. For from off her bones there drips decay, and as the light palpitates with each fleeting, beating, throbbing of this exhausted heart, I perceive two eyes of black groping nearer." (R. D. Peters, "Lamona," 1993)

# MUTANT POPCORN

Nick Lowe

Ah, here's another one awake. Now, now, don't be alarmed; the moulded steel restraints are just a routine precaution. We'll have you out of that tank just as soon as Dr Zorg here has finished in your head. Oh, no, I really shouldn't try moving; it's a very delicate procedure, and I promise you we'll have the top of your skull back on before you can say "all hail the galactic hive-queen," or anything else for that matter, ha-ha.

I daresay you're wondering where you are, and what we've done to you. I'm delighted to say you've been selected for enrolment in the Fifth Arcturan Interstellar Legion, which

necessarily entails beaming up to our mothership for some minor surgical enhancements so that you can be reprogrammed for your exciting role as a service drone in our outreach mission 2000. Oh, it's nothing much; just replacing a few of your organic human parts with more convenient mechanical components. We've been doing the same to your Earth film industry since the 1970s. Surely you'd noticed the way the human elements of the big hit movies have been progressively replaced with easy-to-program mechanical alternatives? Our technicians planetside are on the verge of replacing the human personality entirely with implanted memories of childhood trauma, and all stories with by-numbers film plots generated by computer from our Mythic Journey™ algorithm and cloned entirely out of tissue from earlier films.

Take what we did with Tim Burton and *Sleepy Hollow*. I know what you're thinking: rarely has a film project with so much going for it gone so stunningly, jaw-paralysingly wrong for so little good reason. In

what should have been a triumphant return to the making of films that audiences want to see, Tim Burton directs Johnny Depp, Christopher Walken, the entire RSC Veterans Association and introducing a whole new look for Christina Ricci as a conventional romantic clotheshorse, in Andrew Kevin Walker and Tom Stoppard's millennial reworking of the first American classic! What could possibly go *wnorg*? Surely these people couldn't make a duff movie if you severed their heads, buried them under an ancient oak on the edge of town, and left them to get on with it while you nipped off down the pub?

Well, that's where we came in. Burton's Achilles heel has always been his inability to write screenplay, leaving him fatally at the mercy of the hired hands engaged to turn his inchoate visions into semi-conventional plots with dialogue. You'll have noticed that *Sleepy Hollow* actually originates in a story by its makeup man – Kevin Yagher, one of the best there is at his day job, but with no previous convictions for storytelling – on which first Andrew

Kevin Walker and then a luckless Stoppard have done their best to mysteriously little avail. But you see, Walker has been one of ours from the start, brilliantly incapable of anything but formula plotting in overblown genre movies, whom everyone remembers for writing *Seven* and conveniently forgets he also and mostly wrote things like *Brainscan*. Notice, for example, the way his idea of comedy is recycling shaggy-dog *Carry On* routines (the far superior "FOUL FEET SMELL SOMETHING HORRIBLE" number from *Screaming*) in vastly clumsier, wholly unfunny versions. You know we've now got him working on *Rendezvous with Rama*? Oh, just you wait.

Needless to say, our man had no hesitation in dumping Washington Irving down the shredder. The punchline of Irving's original story was that the legend of Sleepy Hollow is just that, a legend, whose real impact is in the satirical clash between the nicely-observed little world of upstate Hudson society and the elemental imaginings of German romantic folklore transplanted to the New World in the flush of post-revolution; and the butt of it all is the hapless Ichabod Crane, the lovingly-caricatured schoolmaster and loser who gets stuck in the centre of this web and becomes its eventual comic victim. None of this, obviously, is of much use or interest to the modern machine-movie sensibility we've so carefully nurtured, which demands that the spectacle be real, big, and feature-length. So we've implanted a wholly new plot in which the headless horseman is a genuine

supernatural being who actually does chop people's heads off, but is also subject to manipulation by flesh-and-blood mortals for impossibly convoluted conspiratorial reasons of their own – which might still have come perilously close to being interesting, if only the characters didn't all have the same name and if it weren't obvious from the start who the villain is.

The thing we're proudest of here is Johnny Depp's performance, which sets the new benchmark for unbelievably bad acting in a major motion picture. This being a machine-people movie, Ichabod gets a radical make-over from zero to hero, provincial schoolmaster to next-century forensic NY detective, who comes upstate with his new-fangled dialogue ("I'm sorry for your loss") and his tic-infested big-city acting and recovered memories of childhood abuse. We've made it a rule of post-*Star Wars* cinema that whenever a character makes no sense whatever you conjure up a parental trauma to "explain" it, but we do think *Sleepy Hollow*'s is our most postrational ever. ("Oh, now I remember, the reason I like forensics is because my dad executed my mom in an iron maiden for practising hexcraft. Fancy forgetting that.") In any case, even if the character as written held together, Depp's interpretation would still be one of the most surreal pieces of acting ever seen on screen – with his unquiet facial muscles, cod-RADA accent, and an eyebrow wrangler who looks to have got the job on the basis of previous work with trampolining caterpillars. It's all about as convincing as *Sleepy Hollow* itself, which

looks exactly like a digitally-retouched Hambleton installed with the obligatory Lovecraftian covered bridges. (Those unable to recover their senses in time to leave the auditorium by the end of the credits will witness a thank-you to the "Town of Hertsfordshire, London, England" – *sic, sic, and sic*).

The result is a movie from which your primitive earth logic has been almost completely eliminated. Nobody with an unmodified organic brain could believe for one nanomoment in the Ichabod/Katrina romance; in Ichabod's strange mixture of arachnophobic timorousness with gung-ho heroics; or in the man of science's steeplechasing leaps of supernatural deduction like "The tree is a gateway between two worlds!" and "That is why the horseman returns from the grave – to take heads until his own is restored to him!" We particularly enjoyed transposing formulaic movie set pieces to 18-century technology, like the subway-car stunt chase with coach and horses, but we were careful to ensure a steady flow of non-sequiturs even at this height of potential fun. (Notice the way our heroes turn their backs on the Horseman at the very moment he starts to regenerate, as if to say, oh well, who cares, let's have a snog.) And you'll have noticed we've managed to fill the whole thing with graphic gore that, unlike the evaporation rays of *Mars Attacks!*, manages to be casually nasty without being the least entertaining; much like what we have in mind for your species, actually.

Are you still with us? This next part of the procedure may tickle just a bit, so you may want to bite down fairly hard on your gag.

Of course, not everyone cooperates, though usually we can deal with it in a way that doesn't draw too much attention. In the case of *Sleepy Hollow*, one or two of the remaining humans attempted to bail out of the credits, but we made very sure they didn't get away: Stoppard's furtive involvement was actively broadcast to the industry press, and Walken appears on the posters almost as large as Ricci's assisted cleavage. And we actually had to terminate your Ted Hughes over the *Iron Giant* project, which was so very important to us as a way of preparing your children to embrace unstoppable war machines from space as their friends, and necessarily involved turning one of the untouchable modern children's classics into a robotically formulaic cartoon. In Hughes' original, the Iron Man is an elemental being of unknown origin who battles and tames an alien menace from space. Our brand-management people certainly weren't having that, so we got rid of the space creature entirely and made

Previous page: Christina Ricci plays Katrina Van Tassel opposite Johnny Depp's Ichabod Crane in *Sleepy Hollow*. Facing page, top to bottom: Ben Affleck, Chris Rock and Salma Hayek in *Dogma*. Below: Janeane Garofalo as *The Bowler*, a superhero with a difference, in *Mystery Men*.





the Giant himself an amnesiac alien killing machine who has to learn "You are who you choose to be." So much more inspirational, don't you think? So in the finished movie, Hughes now gets a "Consultant" credit and one of those *Contact*-style backhanded dedications that say, *Hey, we travestied his book, but we did it out of love, and unfortunately now he's unavailable for rebuttals.*

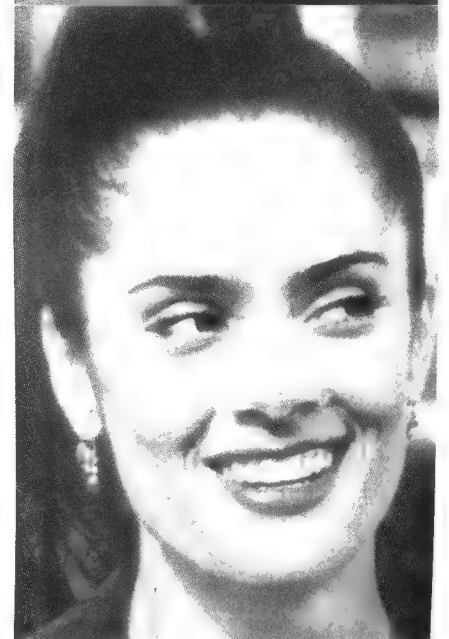
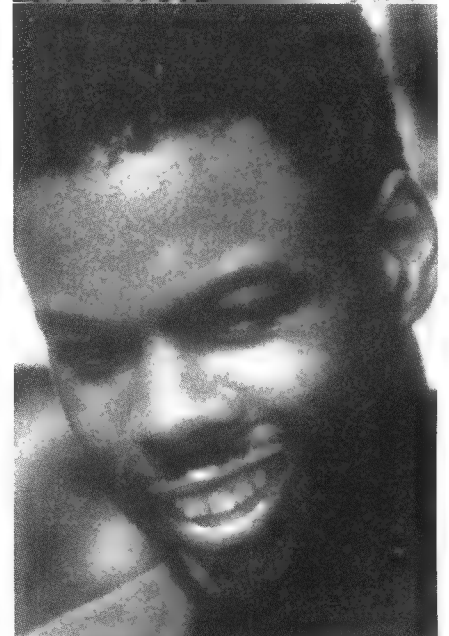
The main problem we had with Hughes is that his story is just not a tale of childhood angst. The original Hogarth has two parents, no demons, and no desperate need for a new dad and a hundred-foot imaginary space friend to whom he can say (sickbag, nurse) "I love you." But our people have been monitoring your Edwardian children's books and have determined that they're all about the need for missing parents and familial affection. Naturally there's a bit of a timelag owing to the 36 light years' transmission distance from Arcturus mission command, but you'll learn not to question orders from the nest. In any case, we've played safe by giving it a period setting in America's mythic past ("Rockwell, Maine," 1957), and by substituting cartoon versions of reality wherever possible: thus the "Duck and Cover" classroom film is a very poor recreation of the 1951 original, with a new and inferior version of the classic Bert the Turtle song performed by the director and his friends, and any real-world nastiness attacked by Hughes' book and its 1993 sequel gets safely transported back in time. Even the comics references are actually subtly anachronistic (*The Spirit* too late, *Mad* in its magazine incarnation too early) or simply made-up, because reference to real cold-war comics might not please their current copyright owners, and the last thing we wanted to do was attract the attention of mighty Marvel lawyers. The real Iron Man had an astonishing episode in about issue 4 called "Prisoner of the Reds," which said way more about the cold war than this bland, neutered fable. You can see why we had to change the title.

By and large, in fact, we have trouble getting our people to work with comics. We haven't been able to do anything with the Dark Horse movies, for example, and were particularly caught out by *Mystery Men* managing to be quite fun, in a sham-bolic way not uncharacteristic of its source (Bob Burden's *Flaming Carrot* spinoff about a team of superheroes cursed with powers too sad or negligible to qualify for the A-team). So we're simply relying on nobody going to see it, on the grounds that (a) superteam movies are traditionally doomed, and (b) even comics fans – the only obvious

audience – will think twice about indulging in a movie whose central argument is that superhero comics are all about losers fantasizing themselves as heroes. It looks cheap, probably on purpose, and the plotting, like its source's, has a cheery disdain for any prevailing orthodoxies of structure, pacing, and logic. But the film is still quite a lot better than the original comics, even if the gags still only fire about as consistently as our heroes' powers, and almost everyone in the huge ensemble cast is underused – as if they've just unloaded two barrels of affordable C-listers at the script in the hope that some will hit bullseye. There are a lot of lines that seem brilliant in context, but have the quality of that funniest joke ever that you wrote down in the middle of the night and then read back in the morning. ("We have a blind date with destiny – and it looks like she's ordered the lobster!") On the whole, we don't perceive it as a threat.

Same with *Dogma*, Kevin Smith's sprawling folly pitting his regular *Clerks* duo of Jay and Silent Bob against the angelic Ben & Matt and a heavenly host of supporting stars in a comicsy theological fable you either love-but or loathe-but. Like *Mystery Men*, *Dogma* is over-cast, overlong, and all over the place, and whether you earth people find it entertaining at all depends largely on how funny you're able to find its rather soft satirical target and the culture from which it comes, as well as how well-trained you are in comics. Smith is, of course, the most comics-savvy of all contemporary film-makers, and in *Dogma* he's tried to create a film that treats big metaphysical ideas as playfully as his idols Gaiman and Morrison. Its spark is the recognition that Catholicism has been the West's superhero comics for most of its existence, prompting the brilliant inspiration of treating Catholic doctrine in exactly the way science fiction treats science: fast, foolish flim-flam fun. The first hour is so inventive, witty, and teeming with fast-bowled ideas that its perfunctory plotting and structure are barely a problem, and for a while our people were seriously concerned that they might have a masterpiece on their hands. Fortunately, things unravel badly in the second hour, which goes on far too long and gets hopelessly tangled in its own complications, though there are still a slightly worrying number of inventive gags and original ideas.

In the end, though, we felt it put enough bullets in its foot not to be a risk. The main difficulty with *Dogma*, notwithstanding the protests, is that the film itself is a prime advertise-



ment for all the things it satirizes. The first sketch in the movie centres on Cardinal George Carlin's "Buddy Christ" image revamp of our Lord as a grinning, winking, thumbs-upping dude. But the whole movie amounts to a true believer's own Buddification of Christianity as non-doctrinaire, painfully pluralistic in race and gender, and purged of all those unfortunate Romish embarrassments like ritual, church, and, erm, faith. ("You think having a belief is a bad thing?" asks our heroine. "I think," opines the Lost Apostle, "it's better to have an idea. Mankind got it all wrong by taking a good idea and building a belief structure on it.") That it comes close at times to conveying something of its maker's enthusiasm for the faith is entirely down to its heroine. While most of the huge cast are completely wasted, Linda Fiorentino is magnificent, better than her best, and makes the difference between a two-hour undergraduate sketch and a film that, for all its messiness, actually conveys something thoughtful and touching about Catholic life-experience and the complexity of faith. It grants itself a lot of indulgences, including four screenfuls of unfunny pre-title apolo-

gies and the kind of inspiration thank-list you see on the liners of albums by no-hoper bands; while the waggish casting of God unfortunately requires that we have to suffer Her voice in an anything but head-exploding end-title song. We're hoping that's enough to turn people off, especially as this wretched film has more brilliant ideas in it, and more duff ones for that matter, than the rest of the year's output in one. Frankly, we'd hoped for less.

**F**or a reminder of how brainless, charmless, and worthless an utterly by-numbers machine movie can be, you need to look instead to something like *Inspector Gadget*: a film that unadapted earth brains find absolutely electrodes-in-the-gums unbearable for all of its 80-minutes-and-feels-like-180, and which we do regard as our finest achievement yet. The casting of Matthew Broderick as the cyborg Clouseau is especially masterly; I think he manages to be the most comprehensively unappealing hero since the last one played by Dennis Quaid (one of our most loyal workers, needless to say). We've had quite a hand in Disney's recent run of live-action sf juveniles from recycled media

material (*The Nutty Professor*, *Flubber*), but this is the closest we've come yet to a film from which we've managed to eliminate all human character, sense and fun. Our inspectors have examined the finished movie frame by frame, and confirm that it contains not one single funny gag. Machine-plotted, bolted together out of the standard origins and evil-double story modules we've used in most of our superhero movies, *Gadget* is our attempt to make impressionable unaccompanied juveniles feel good about the mechanization of entertainment, the digital enhancement of human actors with cartoon capabilities. As the boffin lady says, "It's animated by will, not by thought – by your heart, not your head."

Think of it as a kind of *RoboCop Jr.*, a reassuring allegory about having your human parts replaced by mechanical stunt implants. And that's why we've selected it as our in-flight choice to relax you for the final stage of your procedure. Nurse Xgk? The screens, if you please. Now watch the light while I pin your lids open, and just feast your eyes on the amusing cartoon title sequence. Oh, really now, do stop thrashing.

Nick Lowe

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# The FIRE EGGS

Darrell Schweitzer

Uncle Rob's voice was breaking up, either from emotion or a bad transmission or a combination of both. I tapped the enhancer key and he came through a little better.

"It's your Aunt Louise. She's worse."

"She's already dying," I said without thinking, and just barely stopped myself before blurting out, *so how could she be any worse?* Even over the phone, at that distance, I knew I had caused my uncle pain. "I'm sorry, I—"

How hideously selfish we can be at such moments.

But the moment passed. Rob was beyond grief, I think, into some sort of acceptance of the fact that his Louise was doing to die soon of one of those new and untreatable cancer-like diseases that were going around.

Then he told me.

"She's talking to the Fire Eggs, Glenn."

"Jesus —" to use a slightly obsolete expression. Of course lots of people had talked to the luminous, two-and-a-half metre high ovoids since they first appeared all over the world in the course of half an hour on January 23rd, 2004, anchoring themselves in the air precisely 1.3 metres above the ground. Sure, lots of people claimed the Eggs *answered back* by some means which evaded all recording devices but was an article of faith among

believers. More than one religion had started that way. There were dozens of bestselling books from the revelations. Countless millions had merely surrendered to the inexplicable and were comforted.

But not Louise. She and Rob were *both* too supremely rational for that, even Louise, who liked to tweak his pride by pretending to believe in astrology or psychic healing. It was just a game with her. Or had been.

Uncle Rob had once told me that he regarded true mental decay, meaning organic senility, as the worst of all possible fates. "If I get like that, shoot me," he said, and he wasn't joking.

And now Louise was talking to the Fire Eggs.

She'd once compared them to lava lamps, from the way they glow in the night, the darker colours rising and swirling and flowing within the almost translucent skin to no discernible purpose. She was old enough to remember lava lamps. She explained to me what they were and what they were for, which was, in essence, nothing. Purely aesthetic objects.

But I am ahead of myself. The first theory to explain the presence of Fire Eggs was that they were bombs, the initial barrage in an invasion from space.



I am old enough to remember that. I was almost six in 2004, the night of the Arrival, when the things popped into existence with muted thunderclaps (though some reported a crackling sound). There was panic then, the roadways clogged with carloads of people trying to flee somewhere where there weren't any Fire Eggs, all devolving into one huge, continent-wide traffic jam when it became clear that there *was* no such place.

My own family never got that far. My father bundled us all into the car, backed out of the garage with a roar, and then made the discovery shared by so many others that first night, that a Fire Egg could not be removed from where it had situated itself by any human agency. We crashed into the one which blocked our driveway. I remember the trunk of the car flying open, my mother screaming, my father screaming back.

Later, I saw that the rear of the car was crumpled like a soda can.

That night, we all sat up bleary-eyed in front of the television, slowly concluding that the world's governments and scientists were just as helpless as we were.

We also learned that it had been worse elsewhere. Innumerable traffic accidents. In the London underground, a train hit one of the things in the tunnel just north of Charing Cross. The first car disintegrated, the second accor-dioned, and almost a hundred people were killed.

Another one, on a runway in South Africa, had destroyed an airliner, which "fortunately" was empty at the time, but for the crew, who died.

My father made a noise of disgust and shut off the TV.

I remember that we prayed together that night, something we didn't often do. I think my parents, like a lot of people just then, were waiting for, expecting imminent death.

But nothing happened. Days, weeks, months passed. Life settled down, nervously. If the Fire Eggs are bombs, they're still ticking away, silently, 35 years later.

So I dropped down from orbit, invoking the compassionate leave clause in my contract in ways I never would have gotten away with if I were not tenured, and as I drove from the airport I did something very few members of my generation have ever bothered to do and certainly none of my students would ever have tried.

I counted the Fire Eggs, the ones hovering above lawns, others in abandoned stretches of roadway off to my right or left. There was a larger accumulation near the city limits, which might have made some sort of sense, but then they were so thick in an empty field that they reminded me of a herd of sheep mindlessly grazing on the gently sloping hillside.

But I couldn't count them any more than anybody really knew how many had been served by that fast-food restaurant, the one with the Golden Eggs; but of course those were man-made imitations, since, as was apparent from innumerable tests, not to mention attempts to adorn them with graffiti or redecorate them as conceptual art, nothing of terrestrial origin would adhere to a Fire Egg. Indeed, you really couldn't touch them. There was some kind of electrical barrier which made the surface totally frictionless.

I gave up counting somewhere in the low thousands. Of course there were no such easy answers, though numerologists and even serious mathematicians had done their best.

The next theory was that Fire Eggs were alien probes. All the religions were based on that one, The Church of Somebody Watching. This was not wholly without merit, or even benefit. There had been no wars since the Fire Eggs arrived. Maybe they'd put mankind on good behaviour.

Uncle Rob's house looked pretty much as it always had, the towering tulip-poplars along the driveway now leafless and waiting for winter, the house's split-level "ranch" design a leftover from the previous century, even a decorative "mailbox" out front, for all nobody had actually received mail that way in years; and of course the Fire Eggs on the front lawn, arranged by random chance into a neat semi-circle. We'd named them once, years after they'd arrived, when few people were afraid of them any more and Fire Eggs had become just part of the landscape and Uncle Rob's last book, *What To Name Your Fire Egg*, had enjoyed a modest success. We called ours Eenie, Meenie, Moe, and Shemp.

They glowed as they always did in the evening twilight, completely unchanged. The one on the far right was Shemp.

And there was Uncle Rob in the driveway, who was very much changed, not merely showing his years, but worn out, defeated. Here was a man who had been a world-famous celebrity before his retirement, the ebullient apostle of rationality to the world, his generation's successor to Carl Sagan, and he had four utterly defiant enigmas practically on his doorstep and Louise was dying and she'd started talking to them.

"I'm glad you could come," was all he said. He insisted on taking my bag, a leftover courtesy from a time long ago, when there were no Fire Eggs.

My students could never remember such a time. Many couldn't even imagine it. A landscape without Fire Eggs wasn't real to them. Art gallery attendance dropped off, first from disinterest, then from security problems as every now and then someone tried to "improve" various famous canvases by painting Fire Eggs onto them. It was a compulsion for a while in the 2020s, a kind of mania, which spawned several cults of its own.

Then came the fads, the t-shirts with the Mona Lisa Fire Egg, *Starry Night* with Fire Eggs hovering somewhat unrealistically up in the sky, *The Last Supper* with a Fire Egg on either side of Christ.

I've even seen a redigitalized version of *Casablanca*, still in black and white to satisfy the purists, but with the occasional Fire Egg added to the background in some of the scenes.

I did my graduate thesis on the retro-impact of Fire Eggs on the arts. You know, Hamlet addressing his famous soliloquy to an Egg.

Uncle Rob, Aunt Louise, and I had a very uncomfortable dinner together. It was a shock that she came downstairs

to see me at all. I had envisioned her bedridden, with tubes and drips, surrounded by monitors. I *knew* they'd sent her home to die, so I was shocked, not just mildly surprised, when she descended the stairs in her bathrobe and slippers. She flashed me her patented mischievous smile and a wink, and sashayed down, swinging her hips and bathrobe belt in time like a showgirl.

Then she stumbled and I could see the pain on her face. Uncle Rob and I caught her by either arm and eased her into a chair.

"Take it easy," he whispered. "Just take it easy. Glenn is here. You'll be all right."

"I can see for myself that he's here and you don't really believe I will be all right. Stop lying."

"Louise, please –"

She was still able to eat a little, or at least go through the motions for my benefit. We three went through the motions of a nice friendly meal, doting uncle and aunt and favourite nephew, the Fire Eggs on the lawn glowing through the curtains of the front picture window like Christmas lights glimpsed through snow.

"How was your conference, Glenn?" Louise said.

"I, ah... had to leave early. I missed most of it."

"Oh."

"And what's... with you?"

One of the other things I investigated in the course of becoming one of the leading academic experts on Fire Eggs was what I labelled the Nuke Rumour. During the period in which the world's governments had assigned their top scientists the task of Finding Out What Those Things Are At All Costs, after the attempts to probe, scan, drill through, transmit into, or otherwise penetrate the Eggs had failed, so the story goes, somebody somewhere – always in a nasty, remote place where They Have No Respect For Human Life – set off a nuclear device under a Fire Egg. It made a huge crater, destroyed much of the countryside, killed thousands directly and thousands more from the subsequent radiation, but the *Egg* was utterly unperurbed. The world held its breath, waiting for retaliation.

And nothing happened.

As I first heard the story, it happened in China, but a colleague at Beijing University I knew on the Worldnet assured me no, it was in India. In India they said it was in the Pan-Arabic Union and the Arabs said it was the Russians and the Russians said the French; and I was able to follow the story all the way back to Wyoming, where people were sure the blast had wiped out some luckless desert town and the CIA had covered the whole thing up.

"I think the aliens are trying to exterminate us with boredom," some late-night comedian quipped. "I mean, who the hell *cares* any more?"

"I've been having dreams," Louise said.

"Please –" Rob whispered.

She reached over and patted his hand. "Now you hush. This is what you called the boy all the way down from his conference to listen to, so he might as well hear it. You can't fool me, Robert. You never could."

"Just... dreams?" I said.

"You know the kind where you know you're dreaming, and you say to yourself, *this isn't right*, but you go on dreaming anyway? It was like that. I fell asleep in front of the TV and woke up inside my dream, and it was *The Smothers Brothers* on the screen, and I was a girl again. Then somebody turned it off and the room filled up with my friends from school – and I knew a lot of them had to be dead by now, so they couldn't be here – but they were all young too, and dressed in bell-bottoms and beads, and barefoot with their toenails painted, the whole works. You know, like hippies, which is what we pretended to be. Somebody put on a Jefferson Airplane record and it was going on about sister lovers and how in time there'd be others. And there were Fire Eggs with us, there in my own living room – here, in *this* house, not where my parents lived when I was a girl – one Egg for each of us, and they seemed to radiate warmth and love. Fred Hemmings, Fat Freddie we called him, tried to get his Egg to take a toke of pot, and it seemed so funny that I was still laughing when I woke up, and you know, *there were ashes on the rug!*"

Aunt Louise laughed softly, and for a while seemed lost in a world of her own, and Rob and I exchanged wordless glances which said, *I don't get it* and *You wouldn't want to, believe me*.

"It was just a dream, Aunt Louise. I'm glad it made you happy."

"I didn't use to have dreams like that."

"Maybe now –"

"Yes, maybe now it's time. I can hear my dreams now."

"Hear them?"

She sat for a time, oblivious to us both, and she seemed to be listening to her dreams from long ago, which had Fire Eggs in them.

As always, nothing happened. The four Fire Eggs glowed softly on the lawn and the world was still.

Uncle Rob took me aside into the kitchen.

"If this weren't so awful, I suppose you'd find it academically interesting."

"Is there anything I can actually *do*? Why exactly did you ask me to come here?"

"She's going away, Glenn."

"Don't mince words. She's dying. You know that. I know that. *She* knows that. It is not news. If there is anything I can do to provide comfort, Uncle Rob, or otherwise help you cope, please tell me. Right now I feel about as useless as an ornamental mailbox."

"Or a Fire Egg, doing nothing."

"Maybe they're *supposed* to do nothing. For 35 years, they've just sat there. We've waited for them to speak, to open up, to explode, to vanish and leave gifts behind, to *hatch*, for Christ's sake. But they will not hatch, which may be the whole point."

"Always you change the subject, Glenn. I suppose it is helpful to have a questing mind, but you are changing the subject."

"Not entirely. Please. Hear me out. Maybe they're like the plastic sunken ships and mermaids and stuff we put into the fishbowl. They're decorations, and make little sense to the goldfish. Most of the goldfish, after a while,

just keep on swimming, but maybe a few, the sensitive ones, respond in some way. That's what the objects are for. That's why they're passive. They're waiting for just the right people to respond."

Uncle Rob began to cry. He held onto my shoulder. I was afraid he was going to fall over. I just stood there, wondering exactly what I'd said wrong, but he explained soon enough. "You're talking crap, Glenn. You know it. You're an educated man. Before I retired, I was the world's top science guru. We're goddamn *experts*, both of us. Our job is to know. When we're up against something we *can't* know, it just tears us down. We've both been sceptics. We've both published articles debunking all the crazy stories and rumours about the Fire Eggs. You were the one who pointed out that the stories of people being taken inside were just a continuation of the UFO mythology of the last century. We kept ourselves clean of mysticism. We were *rational*. Now this. Louise wants me to believe that as she approaches the threshold of death she can hear things from the beyond, and the beyond is inside those Fire Eggs, as if whoever sent them is building a gateway to Heaven —"

"I thought it was a stairway."

"What?"

"One of her old songs."

"Can't we at least retain a little *dignity*? That's what you're here for, Glenn. I want you to help her retain a little dignity."

The presence of Fire Eggs actually stimulated the moribund space programs of the world, a bit cautiously at first, as if everybody were afraid that They would swoop down and crush us if we started pressing out into the universe. This was called the Tripwire Theory, the Fire Eggs as alarm device, ready to start screaming if the goldfish tried to climb out of the bowl. But, as always, nothing happened. The Eggs remained inert. No pattern was ever detected in their subtle, shifting interior light. There was no interference as robots, then live astronauts, then a combination of the two proved definitively that there were no Fire Eggs on the Moon or on Mercury, or Venus, or Mars, or on the rocky or ice satellites of the gas planets. The results from Pluto, I understand, are still being evaluated, but meanwhile the first interstellar probes have been launched, and some people began to look out into the universe again for an answer, rather into their own navels. They began to regard the Fire Egg problem as one which could be solved.

The optimists said that was the whole purpose of the Fire Eggs being here in the first place.

I looked back into the dining room.

"She's gone."

"Another damn thing after another I have to put up with," said Uncle Rob, opening a closet, getting out a coat, handing me mine. "She wanders sometimes. But she never goes very far."

I put on my coat. "In her condition? Should she be out at all?"

"No. But her mind is sick too, not just her body."

I didn't ask any more. There was no sense making him review the endless futilities, the grinding, subtle agonies

he'd gone through as each and every medical option had been exhausted. She couldn't be put in an institution. There was no money for that. All his was gone. The various plans had long since run out of coverage. Besides, the legalistic wisdom went, what actual harm was there in an old lady wandering around the neighbourhood talking to the Fire Eggs? Which is a bureaucratic euphemism for *nobody gives a shit*.

"Come on," I said, nudging Uncle Rob toward the door. "I'll help you find her."

If they'd appeared precisely in the year 2000, things would have been really crazy, but in any case the Fire Eggs rekindled millennialist fears. Clergymen denounced them as tools or emissaries of Satan and searched the scriptures, particularly *Revelations*, to come up with a variety of imaginative answers. There had been a time when Uncle Rob and I had enjoyed deflating this sort of thing. "The Beast of the Apocalypse does not lay eggs," I had concluded an article, and Rob had used that line on his TV show and gotten a lot of applause.

But the Spiritualists took over anyway. Fire Eggs were Chariots of the Dead, they told us, come to carry us into the next life. They were also alive, like angels. They knew our innermost secrets. They could speak to us through mediums, or in dreams.

Rob and I found Louise on the front lawn, sitting cross-legged on the icy ground in her bathrobe, gazing up at the Fire Eggs. It was almost winter. The night air was clear, sharp.

"Come on." She patted the ground beside her. "There's plenty of room."

"Louise, please go back inside," Rob said.

"Tush! No, you sit. You have to see this."

"Let me at least get you a coat."

"No, you sit."

Rob and I sat.

"Just look at them for a while," she said, meaning the Fire Eggs. "I think that it's important there's one for each of us."

"But there are four, Aunt Louise."

She smiled and laughed and punched me lightly on the shoulder and said, "Well isn't that lovely? There's room for one more. Ask your wife to join us, Glenn."

"I'm not married, Aunt Louise."

She pretended to frown, then smiled again. "Don't worry. You will be."

"Did... *they* tell you that?"

She ignored me. To both of us she said, "I want you to just sit here with me and look and listen. Aren't they *beautiful*?"

I regarded Eenie, Meenie, Moe, and Shemp, and they looked as they always had. I suppose in other circumstances they could indeed have seemed beautiful, but just now they were not.

I started to say something, but then Louise put her dry, bony hand over my mouth and whispered, "Quiet! They're singing! Can't you hear it? Isn't it heavenly?"

I only heard the faint whine and whoosh of a police



skimmer drifting along the block behind us. Otherwise the night was still.

Uncle Rob began sobbing.

"I can't stand any more of this," he said, and got up and went toward the door. "Can't we have a little dignity?"

I hauled Louise to her feet and said, "You've got to come inside, *now*."

But she looked up at me with such a hurt expression that I let go of her. She wobbled. I caught hold of her. "Yes," she said, "let me have a little dignity." I think she was completely lucid at that moment. I think she knew exactly what she was doing. She sat down again.

I turned to Uncle Rob. "You go on in. We'll stay out here a while longer."

So we sat in the cold, autumn air, in front of the Fire Eggs, like couch potatoes in front of a four-panel TV. No, that's not right. It doesn't describe what Louise did at all. She listened raptly, *rapturously*, to voices I could not hear, to something which, perhaps, only dying people *can* hear as they slide out of this life. She turned from one Fire Egg to the next, to the next, as if all of them were conversing together. She reached out to touch them, hesitantly, like one of the apes in the ancient flatvideo classic, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, but of course she could not touch them, and her fingers slid away as if her hand couldn't quite locate the points of space where the Fire Eggs were.

At times she answered back, and sang something, as if accompanying old voices, but I think it was some rock-and-roll song from her psychedelic childhood, not an ethereal hymn from the Hereafter.

Or maybe the Hereafter just likes Jefferson Airplane. Or the Fire Eggs do.

I would like to be able to say that I achieved some epiphany myself, that I saw the Fire Eggs in a new way, as if the scales had fallen from my eyes and I saw truly for the first time. I would like to say that I heard something, that I received some revelation.

But I only watched the pale reds and oranges drifting within the creamy, luminous white. I only saw the Fire Eggs, as every human being on Earth sees Fire Eggs every day of his or her life.

I only heard the police skimmer slide around the block. Maybe one of the cops was staring at us through the darkened windows. Maybe not. The skimmer didn't stop.

And I looked up and saw the autumn stars, as inscrutable as the Fire Eggs, never twinkling, almost as if I were looking at them from space.

Louise died during the night. She started drooling blood, but she looked content where she was, and it wouldn't have made any difference anyway, which may be a euphemism for something too painful to put into words.

I just stayed there with her. After a while, her breathing had a gurgling sound to it, and she leaned over into my lap. I could see by the light of the Fire Eggs that she was bleeding from the bowels and the whole back of her bathrobe was stained dark. But she didn't want to leave. She had what I suppose someone else might have called a beatific expression on her face. She reached up toward the Fire Eggs once more, groping in the air.

And then I rocked her to sleep, by the light of the

unblinking stars and of the Fire Eggs.

Somehow I fell asleep too. At dawn, Uncle Rob shook me awake. I got up stiffly, but I'd been dressed warmly enough that I was all right.

He couldn't bring himself to say anything, but the look in his eyes told me everything.

I didn't have to ask. I didn't have to search. Aunt Louise was gone, bloody bathrobe and all.

Of course any number of disappearances and murders had been attributed to the Fire Eggs in the past, as had so much else. "The Fire Egg ate my homework" was an old joke. "The Fire Egg ate Aunt Louise" didn't go over well with the authorities, so there *was* an investigation, which concluded, for lack of any real evidence, that, despite what the two of us claimed, Louise had wandered off in the night and died of exposure or her disease, and finding her body would only be a matter of time.

"I'll tell you what the fucking things are," said Uncle Rob. "They're pest-disposal units. They're roach motels. They're here to kill us, then to clean the place out to make room for somebody else. Maybe the poison tastes good to the roach and it dies happy, but does it make any difference?"

"I don't know, Uncle. I really don't."

The night before I was to leave, he went out on the lawn and lay down underneath one of the Fire Eggs and blew his brains out with a pistol. I heard the shot. I saw him lying there.

I just waited. I wanted to see what would happen. But I fell asleep again, or somehow failed to perceive the passing of time, and when I came to myself again, he was gone. The pistol was left behind.

It was Aunt Louise who first named them Fire Eggs. Not everybody knows that. Uncle Rob used the term on his television show, and it caught on. He gave her credit, over and over again, but no one listened and the whole world believes he was the one who coined it.

That's what his obituaries said, too.

I think that we're wrong to wait for something to happen.

I think it's been happening all along.

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Darrell Schweitzer's latest book is *Nightscapes* (Wildside Press), a collection of his short stories which includes "A Servant of Satan" (*Interzone* 136). In honour of his being Poet Guest of Honour at Eeriecon in the Spring of 2000, Wildside is also publishing a book of his serious verse, *Groping Toward the Light* ("a real book, with a spine, not one of my cheesy joke pamphlets," as he carefully explains).

"This is Bowman," said Officer Sharkey. "He's our fly on the wall."

"Bowman, say hello to Doctor Felice Weill, and keep it pretty."

"Hi, Doc. I hear you're going to take a ride."

I looked him over. He was not the usual clean-cut, standard-issue-brain type they liked to employ in the Covert Studies Department, but sometimes the CSD finds that standards can't think around corners, or sideways, or whichever way apart from straight on that may be necessary.

Bowman pushed back his long greasy blonde hair and grinned at me. Lovely.

"Well," said Sharkey, "I'll leave you in Bowman's capable... in his hands, and I'll come back for you in about an hour. Any problems, page me."

He turned on his heel and marched away.

"Sharkey doesn't like us down here. Thinks we're creepy. Feeling's mutual," said Bowman. "So, Doc. Who's the patient?"

They always ask that question as soon as they can slip it in comfortably, wanting to know if I might be there for them. Bowman did not bother to wait for the right moment, which suggested either confidence or a lack of social skills. I knew where my money was.

"I have been called in to investigate an instance of operators getting too fond of their work."

"That's no big deal. It's a kick. When you try it out, you'll see why."

"Nevertheless, this is not a recreational facility."

"It should be," said Bowman, laughing. "They'd make a fortune. Follow me to the funfair."

He wove off ahead of me down the corridor, apparently unable to walk in a straight line. Now and then he would collide with the wall, which seemed to surprise him every time it happened.

"I'm flying, so you don't have to do anything. You're just along for the ride, and I make sure we don't get swatted."

He laughed at his own joke for just a little too long as he fitted the helmet over my head. I breathed deeply through my mercifully uncovered mouth and tried not to

panic. Inside the helmet there was nothing but impenetrable darkness, which brought back memories of an unpleasant flotation tank experience. The chair I was seated in was so well padded as to make it seem that I was floating on air, which added to the impression. When Bowman turned on the interface and I got the Fly's eye view of him, I experienced a great sense of dislocation. His giant hand swept by on its way to pick up his own helmet and I flinched. I heard him snigger quietly at my reaction, and steeled myself to give a better performance of the impassive, objective observer.

It is easy for me to intimidate others. My presence often makes them feel that their very sanity is in question (and it often is), so that it becomes just a little hard for me to adapt when I am placed in the intimidating situation. The only answer is to step back into myself.

"Okay, off we go," he said. "Initiating flight."

The Fly rose

into the air, taking my viewpoint with it, and doing something unspeakable to the condition of my stomach. I held my lips firmly together to prevent any cry of alarm from escaping.

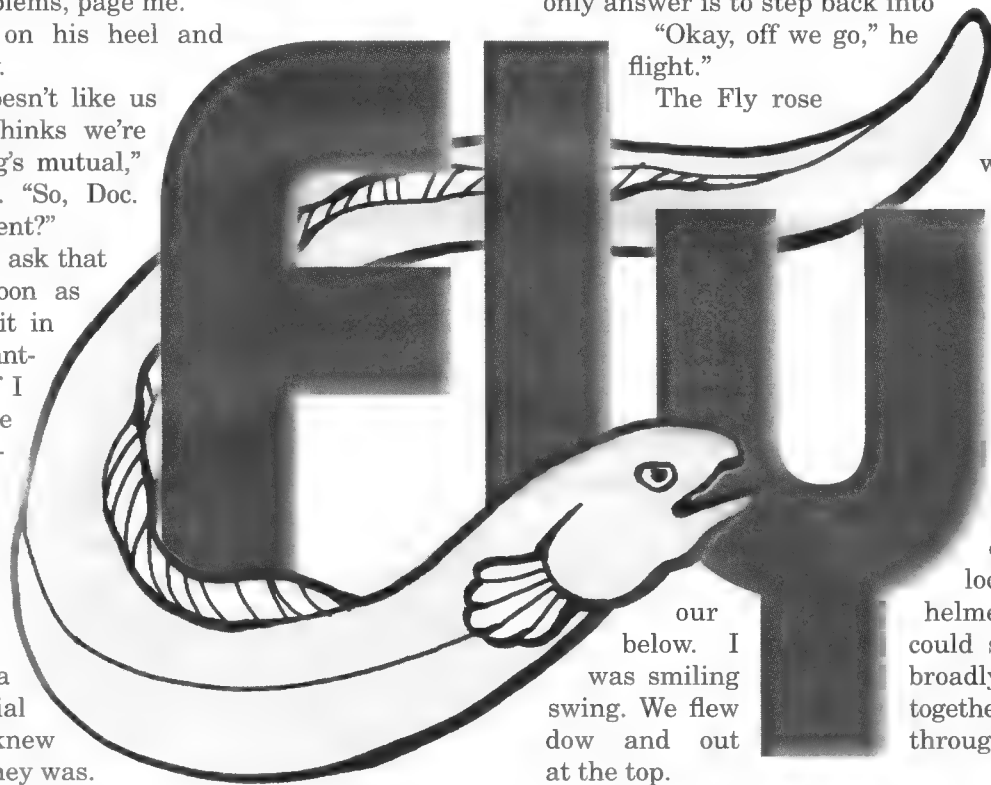
Through the fly's eyes we took a circuit of the room, looking down upon helmeted selves sitting could see that Bowman broadly, like a child on a together towards the win-through the narrow gap

our below. I was smiling swing. We flew down and out at the top.

Bowman took me for a fast circuit of the grounds, buzzing the guard at the gate who flapped his hand at us. I thought he almost hit us, but we veered sharply away just in time. Bowman laughed out loud at that one. A sport that he probably indulged in regularly.

I have never been a lover of amusement-park rides, but now I was trapped in the smallest but most spectacular roller coaster in the world, and my pilot was a juvenile delinquent. As the Fly veered, swooped and circled its way back towards the CSD building my stomach was continually fooled into thinking that it was being left behind. The Fly spiralled up the wall of the building and buzzed in through an open window, flying along the corridor just

in time for us to see Officer Sharkey stepping out for a coffee. He hailed a bullnecked, shaven-headed fellow and they exchanged ritual greetings next to the coffee machine. Bowman buzzed us to a stop on the wall just out of reach above their heads.



*Susan Beetlestone*

Sharkey looked up.  
"I'm going to get a can of fly spray," he said.  
"Could be one of ours," said his friend.  
Sharkey took a good look.  
"Seems real enough to me. You know that little arsehole Bowman is down there now giving the Psych Services girl a ride on his pet?"

"Is he going to show her his Fly, too?"  
They both laughed, mouths wide open, bellies bouncing, very taken with their own startling wit.  
"I think I've seen enough, Mr Bowman," I said evenly, removing my helmet. "No wonder you know what Sharkey thinks of you."

"I know what everyone in the building thinks about almost everything, and I know what they do when they think no-one is looking. They're all paranoid anyway. I'm just the reason they don't know about."

I watched him flying the minute remote back home. His body swayed, presumably with the movements of the Fly, until at last the black speck re-entered the room. It made a circuit of the room and landed on its pad next to the interface control, shuffling into position and protruding its proboscis into the tiny recharge socket.

Bowman pulled off his helmet.  
"If anyone tried to take me off operations, I'd have leverage," he said.

"You've heard about the Eel, then?"  
"I hear about everything," he said.

The way he moved, it was almost as if he was settling and folding an imaginary pair of wings.

If Bowman minded when I had him temporarily assigned to accompany me, he concealed it well. I knew that he had probably directly experienced things relevant to this incident that I could not discover merely by the exercise of imagination. (I never allow myself to speak the word "imagination" professionally, of course. Outwardly I must always maintain the illusion of scientific procedure, even where it is wholly inappropriate.)

In this case, I doubted that there was an effective treatment for the operator concerned, but I could at least provide a screening tool to ensure that vulnerable recruits would not in future be employed in this manner.

Within ten minutes of boarding the submarine I found Bowman in his cabin, helmet on, Fly buzzing around the ceiling. It settled on a light fitting and I looked it sternly in the eye.

"Come out of there, Bowman," I said. "We have work to do."

By the time we were deposited at the Undersea Testing Station, I thought I understood what made Bowman tick. He was completely engulfed in the physical sensations of flexible flight each time he used the Fly and had become addicted to them. He could indulge himself in the ecstasy of a flying dream at any time. And of course his feelings of power were addictive, too. Covert observations frequently have this effect, but do not usually include observations of fellow agents. The whole world was totally open to Bowman.

Eels, of course, did not do such surveillance, so that element of addiction was missing for them – which made me wonder why the problem had begun with an Eel.

I left Bowman to settle in and to explore the UTS in his own way – from his cabin, without the need to speak to anyone, but to wander freely, listen and watch.

It was time to interview the problem Eel.

He was waiting for me in a small observation bay. Just he and I sitting in a transparent bubble looking out into the murky waters from which odd fish would occasionally loom.

He was not like Bowman, but more of a clean, athletic Navy type. Close-cropped light brown hair, pale brown eyes. His hands lay still, folded in his lap, the fingernails clipped short. Everything about him was orderly and just so. Anything I had learned from Bowman would have to be rethought in the light of the personality presenting to me.

As I closed the bulkhead behind me I noticed a fly dart in, just in time. It settled somewhere above our heads. Confidentiality was an issue here, but for all I knew it might have been a real fly.

"I'm Doctor Weill," I said, extending a hand.

He stood, and took my hand in a firm grip.

"John Alexander, Ma'am."

We both sat and he remained calm, open and silent like an empty vessel waiting to be filled. There was the slightest smile on his lips and his head was tilted a little to the right as he respectfully waited for me to begin. I am not used to such calm. Most of the CSD agents I see are agitated, even if they try to conceal it. They are eager to give me their side of things and to convince me that it, whatever it may be, was only a one-time thing, it will never happen again and they are completely back in control now, ready for the field.

"Well, Mr Alexander, can you tell me something about your problem?" I began.

"I don't have a problem, Doctor," he said.

"What about the recent incident?"

A slight frown creased his brow, and his eyes flickered as if he was performing an inner search. Then he looked at me with slightly raised eyebrows.

"The reason, Mr Alexander, that you were taken off operations?"

"I think someone misunderstood," he said. "There was no problem."

"Mr Alexander," I said, "my report states that you failed to complete your mission and refused to bring back your Eel from an unauthorized excursion."

"I did not refuse anything."

"Well, let us say that, when ordered, you failed to comply."

"Well, Ma'am, I suppose I just didn't hear the order. I was kind of... absorbed in my work."

"So much so that you had to be forcibly removed from control and the Eel brought back home by a scout sub."

"I wish they hadn't done that," he said, his expression darkening, a little character showing through at last. "It hurt me. They don't really understand how it hurts to be pulled off like that. I would have come home by myself."

"You say you were absorbed in your work. Can you describe your state of mind?"



"I was just..."

He looked suspicious of me suddenly. I was pleased to get a normal reaction out of him.

"I enjoy my work, that's all," he said stiffly. "That day I suppose I got a little absent-minded. Everybody has those kind of days, don't they? There's nothing wrong with me. I don't know why they won't let me back on operations. I'm fine. It's important that I get back to... work."

"That is why I am here, Mr Alexander," I lied, "to get you back to work. So you can see that it is in your best interests to co-operate with me."

And so he did, in a way, answering all of my questions, completing a couple of personality inventories, but barely responding at all to any attempt I made at getting him to articulate what he thought the problem was. He genuinely did not seem to think there was a problem at all.

Sharkey wanted a progress report straight away and I gave him one, but he was predictably dissatisfied.

"This sort of thing takes time," I told him. "I have yet to pinpoint the problem."

"Doctor, we need answers now. We need Alexander back in operations. In this condition he is a serious problem for us. We also need to know if we're going to see this in our other operators. You have to fix it."

"I've spent two hours with the man. The human mind is complex, and many of its workings are unavailable for conscious scrutiny. Alexander clearly thinks that the problem is in our heads, not his. I need time and a greater understanding of the work he has been doing before I can even begin to think of 'fixing' it."

Sharkey looked at me as if I were beneath contempt. I should be able to plunge my hands directly into Alexander's brain and straighten out the tangled neurones. It is a view that I am used to encountering in Covert Services, which contains far too many rigid thinkers for its own good.

It was much later that I returned to my cabin. Outside Bowman's door, opposite to mine, I glimpsed the arrival of a flying dot. Knocking on his door, I opened it to let the Fly through, and then looked in. Bowman was there in his helmet and command gloves. He flew the Fly a circuit around my head then back into the holding rack.

"Come in," he said as the Fly landed, and he made those curious body movements like an insect approaching its food. The Fly extended its proboscis into the recharge port. It truly was a beautiful piece of engineering, but I thought that there was something other than beauty in Bowman's relationship to it. We can all be wrong sometimes.

"How do they get so much into so tiny a thing?" I asked Bowman as he took off his helmet and shook out his disconcerting long blond hair.

"It's run on a microcomputer. The processor is about the size of pinhead and has leftover space in case we ever need to put in add-ons, and the binocular camera takes up the space that a real fly's eyes occupy. It has some reflex responses, like the escape and landing responses, but the rest is controlled by me through a microwave link."

"And the Eels are just the same?"

"No," he said frowning. "I do know the operators have

brain implants."

"What?"

"Yeah, connected to a signal amplifier. It's kind of weird. I think you ought to see what goes on. I keep getting the feeling that we're in deeper water than just the ocean here, and I don't want to go swimming with the fishes."

"You spend a lot of time waiting for doors to open in your line of work, don't you?" I said.

We had been sitting above a bulkhead on a red sign saying "No Unauthorized Entry" for what seemed like half an hour. From his spare helmet, Bowman grunted. Twitchy as he was out of his Fly, inside it he could live forever quiet and still, watching and waiting.

The moment came. An officer who was totally authorized emerged through the bulkhead and Bowman flew us through the gap while it still existed. We perched on a bank of instrument panels and watched as a young operator performed a curious ballet before a blue screen in a darkened room. He moved his arms and body sinuously, gracefully, like seaweed waving in the swell of a calm ocean. It called to mind Bowman's movements when wearing his helmet and gloves, flying the Fly, but was more elegant, and this operator wore a tiny, crown-like headset, nothing else.

"How does he get his visual feedback?" I asked.

"Who knows?" said Bowman. "Crazy."

Then he flew us across the room and behind a smoked glass screen where the lighting was a little brighter and two agents sat at a desk with monitors, one shut off, one showing a slightly fuzzy underwater scene.

"Okay Larry," one of them murmured into a small mike, "I can see the target now. Take us in closer and perform a restricted grid search for the black box."

Before the blue screen, Larry dived and swam, while on the monitor we saw what looked like aeroplane wreckage coming into view.

The second agent got up, stretched and muttered, "I'm on a break. Back in ten."

Bowman took us out behind him, though I would have liked to stay longer, to try to fathom the secret of Larry's strange dance.

"Agent Sharkey, there are too many things I don't know about the operation of the Eels. If you don't give me full information I won't be able to help you. Mr Alexander is showing personality traits which are not in evidence in his mental health records. They may well be a consequence of his work here. I need full information in order to do my job."

Bowman flew a bit too close to Sharkey's ear. He flapped a hand in irritation and snarled,

"If that's your little friend, tell him I'm getting a flyswat," and left the room.

In spite of his unhelpful attitude, he came back an hour later and thrust a red disc into my hand, saying, "You've got 30 minutes with this."

I invited Bowman to sit in on my read-through, but he seemed to have an aversion to red.

"I'm better off not knowing. Make sure they know that

I don't know," he said. "I don't mind knowing if they don't know I know, but –"

"I get the idea," I said.

I read the disc on my own notebook, and I would have filed my own copy, but red discs won't allow copying and record all attempts, so I had to be content with the old method of downloading data – my own memory, which is far better trained than most people's.

Eel operators were screened volunteers with no family ties due to the procedures they had to undergo – the insertion of two glass cylinders, one into each hemisphere of the brain. These cylinders contained processors for the control of their own personal Eel, and for receiving visual information from it. They were also doped with hormones that induced local nerve growth. Their own brains then grew nerve fibres into the cylinders and made connections with the artificial neurone structure.

During missions, the operator was apparently subjected to a drug-induced theta-wave state, but with the brain structures involved in relaxing the muscles during sleep inhibited.

So, in a kind of waking dream, the operators guided their robotic counterparts via an amplified microwave transmitter. It sounded like an excellent way to induce psychosis, and I wondered how they had got their Psych Section approval.

I was walking with Mr Alexander through the lab complex. He was taking me somewhere. Bowman, in his Fly, was tracking our movements, though I did not let on that I had noticed him.

"They're worried about me because I was the first," Alexander said, in flat tones, no emotion, no resonance. "But they don't understand what the dream is like, and why it doesn't stop."

"So when you sleep you dream you are the Eel?"

"All the time. I dream it all the time. I see what I see, and what it sees."

"Do you like it?"

He stopped and looked into my eyes.

"It's not to like or dislike. It's who I am. They have to let me free again."

He reached over my shoulder to enter his security code into a lock, then pushed open the bulkhead. I followed him through, taking time to give Bowman a chance to slip in.

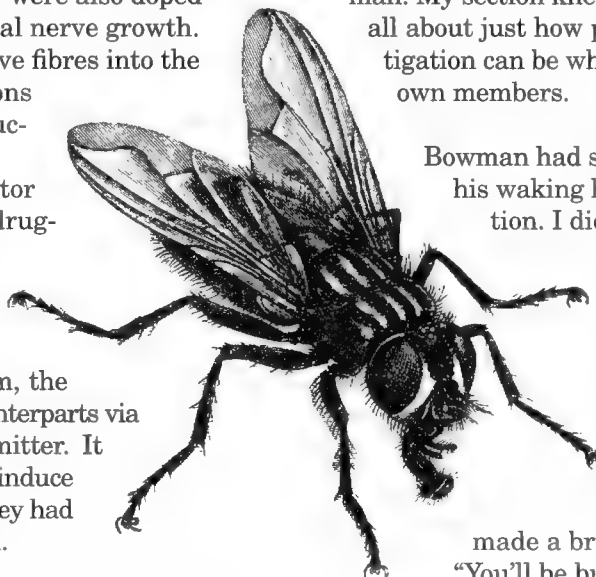
It was a small electronics lab, but I took no note of anything but the Eel. It was about five feet long, a silver, flexiprene covered body like a fat snake, a black bullet head and red camera eyes. I was puzzled that they had it tethered inside a wire cage. Mr Alexander shivered. The Eel flexed its body, rattling the cage, and moved its head to look directly at me.

"Oh Lord," I said, "I didn't know it was on."

"Can't turn me off," he said. "They tried once, and while

the Eel was out, so was I. Convulsions. But I'm okay now."

So there was no Psych Section approval. They had realized that they wouldn't get it so they had bypassed the system, resulting in the current balls-up. I was in a difficult situation here. They needed me, but they did not necessarily want me to report back on my findings. I had already tried to send in a preliminary report, just to test the waters, and had come up against a silence order, which had been imposed, according to Sharkey, for "security" reasons. We might have all been employed by the same Department, but in Covert Services, secrecy can easily become a dangerous vice. Which is one of the many reasons that Psych Section is needed. However, I was not as nervous as Bowman. My section knew where I was, and Sharkey knew all about just how penetrating a Psych Section investigation can be when it concerns the fate of one of its own members.



Bowman had stopped talking to me. He spent all his waking hours flying about the Testing Station. I did not know if he was searching for something in particular, or simply gleaning everything he could use in self defence when it became necessary.

"Come on Bowman," I said, lifting his left ear piece, "help me out. You must have insights that I don't."

He swatted away my hand and made a brief shooing motion.

"You'll be buzzing in your sleep," I said.

Though we were hardly getting anywhere, I carried on the standard procedures with Mr Alexander until I was forced to take the only remaining course of action.

"Put the Eel back in the water," I told Sharkey.

He did not want to do it in case he lost his expensive piece of equipment, but what choice did he have?

I was in a cage in the water, untethered, waiting to be free. The side of the cage fell open and I shot out, turning, swooping, wheeling in the ocean.

"Go to target one-five," said Sharkey's hard voice in my ear.

With me, on a light dose of the appropriate medication, riding piggyback via Bowman's spare headset, the Eel took a circuit of the lab complex, a squat metal structure with the odd patch of barnacles clinging to it. We came around to an observation port and looked a startled agent in the eye. Then we shot away again.

Suddenly I was getting more input than just the visuals. I could hear the rush of water and feel it all along my sleek flexiprene body. I was awake, yet in someone else's dream. Alexander's. And there was a fly buzzing in front of my face.

We all sped through the deep water, other fish flitting in and out of our visual field, until a black sphere emerged out of the gloom, like a darker hole in a dark world. We

swam slowly around until we found the number 15 painted in flaking white on the dummy mine. A perfect performance. Mr Alexander was on his best behaviour, yet something just this side of uncontrollable quivered through the body of the robot Eel.

Now we were almost still the ocean sounds were audible – the resonant whistling of a whale miles away, a low thunder that was probably surf breaking on a distant shore. Then there was a swishing sound close by. A shoal of great silver fish wheeled about us and we were off, swimming with them. I heard Sharkey barking in the distance. We danced with the shoal and I started to understand something, but at last I had to take control.

"Come home," I whispered, over and over again. "We'll keep you in the water."

After a while he did as I asked. We swam back to the holding tank and wriggled close in the company of the other Eels. I closed my eyes and tried to wake fully before I pulled off the headset. Something rattled inside it.

"What the hell's this?" snarled Sharkey, holding up the Fly by one wing. "That little bastard doesn't have clearance –"

I took the Fly in my hand. It was quite still.

"Bowman," I whispered.

Mr Alexander sat quite still, quite absent, all his feeling, all his internal life projected into his robotic alter ego.

"Better shut the holding tank door," I told Sharkey. The only treatment for Alexander would be surgical removal

of his cranial electrodes, followed by drug therapy to normalize his brain function. But what about Bowman?

He was lying on his back, helmet and gloves still on, still active. There was a faint pulse throbbing in his neck, the shallowest of breaths passing his open lips, but no other sign of life.

"What's wrong with him?" asked Sharkey, so very out of his depth with this whole thing from beginning to end.

"Flies can't swim," I said.

I leaned down to pull away Bowman's helmet and as I did, I was overcome by a vision of swimming. I was one of a shoal of silver fish, cutting through the ocean with my body. Then it was gone and I was lying on my face next to Bowman.

"What?" said Sharkey. "What?"

He was losing the power to create sentences. I was in danger of losing far more than that.

"This may," I croaked, "be a little more complex than I anticipated."

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Janet celebrated her 18th birthday by feeding chicken bones to Fluffy, her mother's beloved spaniel.

"Janet!" Wild, but to Janet the scream was delicious. "You know Fluffy's had internal bleeding."

Janet's heart was pumping, but she asked calmly, "Can I take one of the puppies?"

"You'll kill her. Phone! Call the vet."

"I said 'take'. I meant to imply, Mother Dear, that I'm leaving."

"Shut up and tell the phone to call the vet."

Janet picked up the phone, whispering directions to it. She smiled at her mother. "It's obviously too late, but I'll call for you." She put down the phone and left her mother holding her dead Fluffy, crying and petting her cooling head.

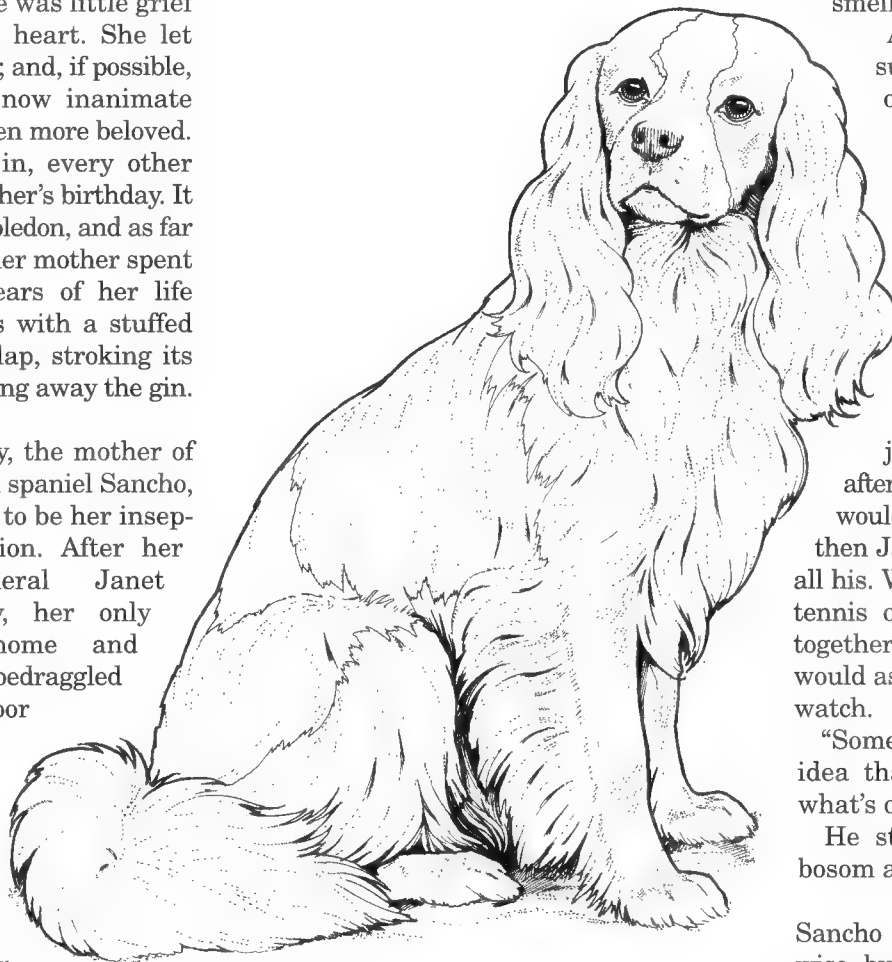
When the taxidermist, whom Janet had instructed the phone to call instead of a vet, arrived, Janet's mother released her beloved into his hands without complaint: there was little grief in this family's heart. She let Fluffy be stuffed; and, if possible, the dog in its now inanimate state became even more beloved. Janet dropped in, every other year, on her mother's birthday. It fell during Wimbledon, and as far as Janet knew her mother spent the last ten years of her life watching tennis with a stuffed spaniel on her lap, stroking its floppy ears, wiping away the gin.

That was Fluffy, the mother of her own beloved spaniel Sancho, who had grown to be her inseparable companion. After her mother's funeral Janet brought Fluffy, her only inheritance, home and placed the now bedraggled thing on the floor in front of Sancho's chair.

"Here's your mother, Sancho. She's come to stay. Let's hope she treats you better

# Loving Sancho

*George Jenner*



than my mother treated me."

Sancho responded by jumping onto the floor and sticking his snout into Fluffy's bum for a good sniff, then offering his to her. When she did not respond he nudged her groin with such force it knocked her off her feet, and she rocked sadly on her back until Janet took her away and placed her on a table in the corner of the room. Sancho climbed back onto his chair, all interest lost, for although Fluffy was odorous, the scents were all wrong.

Now, Janet loved Sancho and Sancho loved Janet. At least she thought he did. He wagged his tail and ran around her feet whenever she came home from work; he spent most evenings sharing the lounge with her and watching television; he spent every night curled up at the end of her bed; and they never spent more than a few hours apart lest they start to pine for each other's comfort, be it in the warmth of stroking, or the grainy smell of dog biscuits.

And every year during summer Janet took Fluffy off the mantle piece and sat her on the lounge beside Sancho, and together the three of them watched Wimbledon. She knew that Fluffy's glass-eyed look of perpetual interest was artificial, but it always seemed to please Sancho after he surmounted his initial jealousy, for he knew that after the tennis was over Fluffy would be back on her shelf and then Janet would once again be all his. With night falling and the tennis over they would snuggle together on the lounge and she would ask him what he wanted to watch.

"Sometimes, Sancho, I get the idea that you don't really care what's on TV."

He stuck his snout into her bosom and she held him there.

Sancho age was moving on, dog-wise, by the time they got Super-

Sat. He hardly ever moved off the couch as Janet flicked through the hundreds of channels. After dismissing a few hundred shows the TV inevitably asked, having quickly learned her tastes, "would you like me to find some tennis? There is a tournament in Korea this week."

"What do you think, Sancho? Should we let the TV make up our minds?"

Well one night, as usual, Sancho did not reply. He usually did not reply because he was a dog, but this time the reason went deeper – Sancho was dead. And because he did his dying during the women's singles final, Janet did not realize until he was stiffening with rigor mortis. She panicked, calmed and called the vet.

"Will he be all right?" she asked.

The vet raised an eyebrow. "He's pretty dead."

"Oh dear. I guess I'll have to get him stuffed."

"Stuffed?"

"Well, I can't live without him."

"Well, why don't you just upgrade him?"

Janet was taken by surprise. She had seen the advertisements, of course, but to do it to Sancho had not occurred to her. What had technology to do with love?

"Isn't petbotics expensive?" she asked.

"Well, yes, but you love him, don't you?" said the vet with a seller's timed emphasis. "I'll bet you miss him already."

Janet still looked uncertain.

"Here's my card," said the vet. "You stick him in the freezer while you think about it, then bring him around if you change your mind. Okay?"

"Okay." He wasn't a big dog, but to make room in the freezer Janet stayed up all night eating ice cream and fish fingers. The TV found some tennis for her, and she took down Fluffy for company, cooing and petting her until she fell asleep.

Sancho came home with a five-year warranty around his neck. She had to send him back once to fix a limp in his left forepaw, but other than that he was as good as new. Better, if you believed the owner's manual, which described in detail the improvements in memory and intelligence. Janet didn't read it. She never read anything, anyway, and she was simply overjoyed to have her Sancho back home in time for the Australian Open.

"Get up on the couch, Honey, while I get the drinks."

Sancho jumped up onto the couch, where he found Fluffy. He sniffed her, then paused momentarily as if thinking what to say to her. Then he stuck his snout under her belly and tossed her unceremoniously onto the floor.

"Is that any way to treat your mother?" asked Janet, her tone not earnestly admonishing. She fell beside Sancho and held him until the small hours of the morning when the tennis was over. She was soon snoring and Sancho struggled gently free of her grasp and jumped to the floor in front of the television. He whined.

"Do you want to change channels?" asked the television. Sancho whined again.

"What do you want to watch? Do you want me to choose something?"

Sancho barked as softly as he could, then turned to look

guiltily at Janet in case she awoke. But she did not stir.

"Is this okay?" asked the television.

Sancho turned.

"It's old, but I think you'll like it," said the television.

It was Lassie. Sancho whined in contentment. Lassie was a spunk and made him horny. He sat transfixed until the end, then stuck his snout under the television to show his gratitude. When the television did not return his affection he went back to where Janet lay snoring on the couch. He stuck his snout inside her skirt and started licking, randomly and ineffectually at first, but soon, guided partly by her hand and partly by an instinct that overwhelmed him in the embrace of carnality, he found the source, the fountain of comfort for his new programming. Then his whole body shuddered into movement and he gripped her leg. Because of her indolent life Janet's fat thighs were larger in girth than the average spaniel, so he had difficulty getting his forelegs around them. But because she herself was holding him so firmly he was stable enough to start humping her shin. When she reached down to hold him and the ejaculate hit her hand she seemed to wake and realize what she was doing.

"Oh, Sancho, what have I done? Get off me, Honey." She pushed him away and ran to the bathroom to clean herself. And she retched.

Desire can overcome shame in privacy, and when a fantasy becomes real it seems as natural as springtime. This is what Janet told herself as she sat with Sancho's snout in her lap, letting herself fall to sleep so that he could wake her with one of his exploratory surprises. They were closer than ever now, and in sensitivity to him, and in wanting the best for him, she admitted that he wasn't satisfied with her. She had an idea.

"Television. Show me the catalogue of Petbotics."

"The mixed doubles is about to start."

"Well, split the screen, Dummy."

As she suspected, Petbotics sold spare parts. She made her order, and the delivery arrived so quickly that she hardly had time to take Fluffy off the shelf and find her sewing kit. She was inexpert, but the part was well made and it took only a simple cut and a few stitches to fit the vagina to the old stuffed spaniel. She perfumed it with some of her own juice, stuck Fluffy between her legs on the floor, called the curious Sancho into her lap, put her head back to sleep and waited. Bliss came into her dreams that night, though she was awake enough to peek through slit eyes at the dogs performing naturally with her; and her relationship with Sancho sailed gracefully down the years.

For a few years, anyway. Sancho was an old dog mixed with a few new tricks, and eventually, meaning a couple of months after his guarantee expired, some of his parts started to fail. It was just an eye here and a leg there at first, but the repair bills added up and he was really only capable of eating and sleeping.

Janet sat with his head in her lap, stroking him gently, looking like any old couple on a park bench. She was reading a message from Petbotics.

"Dear Janet,

—“It’s been over five years since we gave new life to your Sancho. We know you’ve been happy with him, but we wonder if you are aware of the developments in Petbotic technology in the last few years. Wouldn’t you like to talk to one of our cyber-veterinarians about the latest upgrade?”

Sancho nudged her groin, but without energy or enthusiasm. She made the call.

When Sancho came home again from the hospital he had the energy of a puppy. He ran around the flat, joyously knocking over the furniture, wagging his tail and jumping up and down from Janet’s lap. She laughed happily and told him to calm down. And eventually he did come to rest, back in his spot on the lounge with his head in her lap. She smiled. It had been many months since Sancho had had enough energy to please her, and who knew what they had taught him in this latest upgrade. She put her hand on his head then lay back to sleep to the sounds of the Wimbledon mixed doubles final, and was overjoyed to be woken by the familiar wet feeling between her legs.

She opened her eyes and saw the dog buried in the flesh beneath her skirt. But suddenly he stopped burrowing and pulled his head out. He jumped up onto the couch and stared into her eyes.

“Janet,” he said, “I need more than this.”

She was stunned. They said he would be able to speak, but she had expected “feed me” and “scratch my tummy” not a melodious, self-analyzing tenor.

“You see, I do love you, but I’ve felt this peculiar hole inside for longer than I can tell you. The bonking is fun, don’t get me wrong, but it only happens when instinct takes over. I lose control of myself, jump on top of Fluffy, a few seconds of jiggedy-jig and there you have it. Doesn’t it seem a bit meaningless to you once it’s over?”

“Well, no, I think it’s a beautiful act of love. I thought it was a bit warped at first, but then I came to see that it enhanced our relationship. That’s when I put that vagina on your mother to make it better for you.”

“My mother? Fluffy is my mother? God, what have I done?”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“I’m just an animal to you, aren’t I? He’s just a dog. He won’t know any better. What can you expect of someone that says hello to his friends by sniffing their bums?”

“Calm down, Sancho.” She reached for him but he wriggled out of her grasp, jumped off the couch and went to the corner of the room to sulk. Janet watched him, her tears witness to the strings of attachment that were tightening around her heart.

Later, when they had made up and she held him once again to her bosom, she whispered, “you can have more, my love. You can have anything I have to give.”

“Come on, Sancho. I want to watch the Mens’ final of the French Open.”

“Wait a second, can’t you. I just want to finish this chapter.”

“If I miss a point I’ll be cranky. You know I need to see it from the start.”

“I can’t see how it can hurt you to miss a point.”

“You can’t understand tennis because you are a dog.”

He did not reply, but continued reading for a moment then said quietly, “page,” to the TV. “You see? This is the last screen.”

“Hooray,” said Janet. “I wish I’d never taught you to read. And with the price of that last upgrade I could have bought a second television. One each.”

He read patiently for a moment, let out a guffaw at the end, then said, “Tennis.” He jumped up into Janet’s lap, licked her face and said, “without that latest upgrade I wouldn’t have needed my own set.”

She brushed away his kisses, still grumpy. “Well, you can’t have everything in life, can you? And who wants a dog that spends his life reading. It’s antisocial. Ach, get your tongue out of my ear.”

“Don’t you love me any more?” He put his chin on her thigh and looked up at her with sad spaniel eyes that melt hearts.

“You do that just like a normal dog because you know I find it irresistible. Does it come naturally to you or are you just pretending?”

“A tennis fan asks a philosophical question! Have you been reading my books? Let’s go for a walk.”

“Not now. The first game has reached deuce.”

“Please. I want to talk about something.”

“What’s the matter Sancho?” She looked into his eyes, thinking he looked troubled. She shook her head: dogs’ eyes always look troubled.

“I just want to talk. And we need fresh air.”

“All right. Telly! You record all the good bits, won’t you.”

They went to the park, silent except for Janet’s stomping, for it was cold.

“Hurry up and tell me what’s on your mind,” she said.

“It’s difficult to begin. I guess in reality I am just a child, for I have only had a brain for a few years, and my experience isn’t really up to addressing and evaluating the feelings I have been...”

“Been what?”

“Feeling, obviously,” said Sancho, though distractedly. He had turned his head away from her and was sniffing the air. Janet giggled.

“What are you? A man or a dog?”

“Shh! There’s a bitch in the park somewhere. On heat.”

“So what?”

“Take me home, Janet. Quickly.”

“My dear boy, what has got into you?”

Sancho did not answer, for he had bolted. Janet raced after him as quickly as her flabby body could go, bouncing in bemused uncertainty. When she finally saw him again he was humping a tricolour corgi against an oak tree, the two dogs panting in exertion and laughing uncontrollably.

“Stop it,” screamed Janet, kicking madly at the pair, connecting with the bitch’s body just as its owner came into view, an elderly man who kicked Sancho with just as much gusto.

“And you stop that, too,” Janet cried at him, flinging an ineffectual mittened hand at his face.

“How dare you let your scruffy mongrel do that to my Clementine?” He brought his arms up to cover his face, but Janet, seeing the decoupled Sancho sneaking away, left him to chase his own darling.



"Come back here, Sancho." He stopped, and she pounded after him, finally looming over the guilt-ridden dog. "What do you think you were doing?"

"God, Janet. I feel so bad. They left the instinct in my balls."

"Oh, so you're going to blame it on the Petbotics company are you? We have a word for this, Mr Smarty Pants. We call it 'betrayal'. That's how I see it."

"I'm really sorry. And I really didn't mean it. It was instinct: I didn't even feel it, let alone enjoy it."

"It didn't seem like you were having such a bad time. What was so funny that had you both screaming?"

"Oh, she just made a joke. We have jokes between us, you know. About people. Do you want to hear one?"

"Shut up, you bastard."

They walked away together, silent for a time.

"It won't happen again," he said. "I promise."

They walked some more. Finally she asked, "What did you want to talk about?"

"I don't think this is the time."

"Come on. You might as well. It might cheer me up."

"Well..." He paused and took a breath. "We've never talked about having children," he said.

She grunted in response, then after a time nodded.

"What have you been reading?"

"I know you're post-menopausal, but apparently we wouldn't need viable eggs."

"Cloning is illegal, Sancho." He said nothing, apparently unconcerned by the morality. Janet saw this and said, "And what great parents we'd make: a slothful old canophile like me and a hairy, unfaithful little mother-fucker like you."

"Don't bring Fluffy into this." He suppressed his anger and sulked as they walked home.

Neither spoke again until later, when, on the couch watching the tennis replays, he crawled back into her lap and said, "You know cloning is only illegal for humans."

"So?"

"Well, if we can't have children can I at least have a puppy?"

"What are you studying?" asked Janet.

"Chemistry."

"Well, I'm taking Chico for a walk. Do you want to come?"

"Can't. I have to finish this assignment. Don't let him piss on any trees."

"He's a dog. Dogs piss on trees."

"I don't want my son to. It's embarrassing."

"Not for me. Chico!" She called the puppy onto her lap so she could fix its leash without bending over. The little spaniel then escaped her clutches and jumped to the floor, excitedly dragging the leash around the legs of the furniture.

"Chico, stop that," said Sancho sternly. Chico ignored him, of course, and instead jumped up and down off Janet to get her moving. Sancho looked away.

"What's the matter, Sancho?"

His head drooped, the only way Janet could tell that he was sad, for he still had a dog's unchanging expression.

"I can't make Chico understand me," he said.

Janet giggled. "You had five major surgical upgrades before you could speak English. Why don't you speak to him in Dog?"

He barked suddenly and Janet started. The puppy, too, momentarily stopped its joyous tumbling.

Janet said, "You see? He responded to that. What did it mean?"

"I have absolutely no idea." He turned his head back to the molecular model on the television screen. "You'll be back for lunch, won't you?"

"Poor Sancho," she said, huffing to her feet and scratching his head. "You'd starve without me, wouldn't you?"

"Well, do you think I'd hang around if I could feed myself?"

"Sancho!" Silent and hurt she picked up the puppy and headed for the door.

"Wait," cried Sancho. "You know I didn't mean it."

"Didn't you? You're always complaining that you can't talk to me about important things – that I'm not smart enough for you. Well, I don't care any more Sancho. You can go to buggery 'cause now I've got Chico I don't need you any more."

Sancho crawled to her feet. "But I need you. Not just to prepare my dinner, but for everything. You're everything to me, Janet. You made me what I am. I wouldn't hurt you for the world."

"You've been watching too many soap operas and not enough tennis," she said.

"Can I come walking with you? And when we get back we can watch the tennis together. We can even get Fluffy down and pretend it's Wimbledon."

"It is Wimbledon, Mr Intellectual."

"Please don't be sarcastic while I'm crawling."

She laughed. "Well, get your shoes on and we'll go."

"Very funny. I'm glad they didn't give me human feet." He laughed, a curious sound that still seemed like barking, and ran out the door before she could kick him.

Their little tiff had been forgotten by the time they got to the park. They laughed together watching Chico gambol. He had been let off the leash, and the other two sat on the park bench, watching like proud parents.

Suddenly Sancho looked up and sniffed the air. Janet cocked an eyebrow, and kept one eye on him as she called to Chico, "Don't go that way, Honey. It's too near the road."

Sancho said, "Take me home, Janet. Take me home now."

"What is it?"

"That bitch. Near. You know what that does to me."

"You randy old bugger. I thought you were past it."

"I'm serious, Janet. I don't want to betray you."

"Didn't worry you before."

"Of course it did. I don't want to betray you because I love you. I told you I wouldn't do anything to hurt you. Now get the kid and take me home."

"All right." She looked around but Chico was nowhere to be seen. "Chico," she called. She stood and saw that the puppy was heading onto the road. "Quick, Sancho, go and get him."

Sancho ran toward the road, still distracted by the bitch smell. Chico was on the road now, and he dashed after him with all speed. And it was when he was half way across the

road himself that he saw the bitch whose smell was driving his thoughts of betrayal. He changed his course towards her, hesitated and turned back to Chico. That hesitation was enough to confuse the driver of the car, and Sancho was crushed under it to the sound of Janet's screams.

The body was not very bloody, for Sancho's interior was mostly artificial. But it was smart, and feeling itself crushed it called for a technician – who arrived too late.

"There is so much damage," she said. "The skin is okay so we can give him a new body, or even grow one, but I can't guarantee that the memory will be in order. His records say he hasn't been backed up by Petbotics since the last upgrade. Do you do it yourself?"

Janet shook her head.

"Too bad. We should cool him quickly so the skin doesn't rot. Gee, he's got some old parts inside!"

Stunned, Janet simply nodded and let them pack Sancho's body into an icebox. She picked up Chico who was sniffing her feet, and for the first time she saw the crowd that had gathered – including the corgi bitch whose pheromonal cry had led Sancho astray. For a while she stared, not thinking, then finally a heave of her chest startled her to recognition of the situation. She blinked hard on some tears, then with her free hand, for the other still clutched tightly the puppy, picked up the icebox and shuffled home, where she fell weeping onto her couch. Through sniffs she saw the television winking at her.

"What is it?" she said.

"The first game is about to commence at Wimbledon," said the television. "Would you like to see it?"

"All right." She stood wearily and got Fluffy off the mantle and sat, stroking her gently. She heard the game begin and looked up. "Oh, Chico. Don't do that!"

Chico was pissing against the television. Janet put Fluffy aside and scooped Chico into her lap, laughing suddenly as his reaction reminded her of Sancho as a puppy. She stroked him, realizing that it should not be so surprising, since they were Sancho's genes in Sancho's environment. She decided instantly what had to be done, and held the puppy until he slept: she knew it was silly but she did not want him to overhear her call to Petbotics.

"How old does a spaniel have to be for its first upgrade?"

It was a satisfactory answer, so she stood, took the lid off Sancho's icebox, and poured him into the waste chute. Then she laughed, for Chico had awoken and fallen off the lounge. She adjusted her skirt and went to rescue him.

**George Jenner** last appeared in *Interzone* with "At Museum Lodge" (issue 125). He lived in Luxembourg for some years, but has now returned to his native Australia.

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Issue 28 (1999)

John Tan

# The Prophecies at Newfane Asylum

*Don Webb*

**F**or the price of a Spanish dollar the asylum would allow visitors to enjoy the entertainments of the mad. This form of entertainment had disgusted me in Britain, but out of sheer boredom I decided to try this stimulation in America. I had found New Connecticut to be the least interesting of the new republics, lacking in both Wit and Coffee. I had written to His Majesty suggesting that there was little hope of returning the country to British rule, and despite its slate mines and forests primeval, little reason in doing so. But King George was mainly daubing the walls of his room with spit, and not wanting to hear my prediction that New Connecticut was bound to join in ever-closer ties to the rest of the Colonies.

Another man sat and stared catatonically at the lanthorns, slowly defecating on himself. I saw very little in these men and women's actions that indicated they were in fact much different than those we allow to run on the streets. There were more entertaining madmen in the Coffee Houses of Pittsburgh and upon the streets of New York. I saw one rather sad-looking specimen that sat by himself in the furthest corner of the asylum. He clearly did not relish being the source of another's amusement. His eyes seemed clear and his face untroubled when he glanced at us. I was beginning to believe the man was sane, when a raven or another large bird landed on the roof of the building with a great clatter. The man began to scream that "they" had found him and begged the guards to go outside and see to shooting it off the roof, before it could talk to him.

As we left the Asylum I enquired of one of the guards as to the identity of the man so terrified by the raven.

"He's Mr Jeremiah Brewster."

This was one of those coincidences that makes us wonder at the workings of Providence. Jeremiah Brewster had been King George's agent before me. His disappearance had been a matter of great speculation.

"How," I asked, "does one obtain an audience with one of the patients? I would like to meet Mr Brewster."

Brewster, not having a history of violence, could be seen at any time. I was cautioned to go during the day, as his "fits" occurred only at night.

"I don't want to talk to you," said Mr Brewster

"I am not particularly interested in your wants. I am interested in why after five years of sterling service, you stopped writing your reports. How did you land in this hell-hole?" I asked.

His cell was littered with straw, it being a curative for the mad to sleep in the manner of animals. It was lit by a single lanthorn and it smelled bad, the chamber pot being emptied but once every two days. He had a few books stacked nicely along the wall, and a portrait of King George. He maintained (I had discovered) an active correspondence with the Observatory at Greenwich, but otherwise wrote to no one, nor had any visitors.

"I came here to seek protection," he said.

"Protection from what?" I asked.

"Didn't they tell you? My particular hobbyhorse is that I believe the night sky is filled with demons under Satan's great majesty that wish to torment me for my wickedness."

This was set in such a tone of biting sarcasm, that I knew not to believe it.

"You know who I am, I've given you the password, I can get you back to England. Who is it, the Green Mountain Boys? The Spaniards? The Jesuits?" I asked.

"You cannot give me protection. I might be safe in London for awhile, but they have human agents."

"Tell me what you know, and I will make sure the proper authorities know."

"Certainly. I'll tell you what you I know. You'll see just how far you can get with your knowledge. I came to New Connecticut, or as our French friends call it Vermont, in



1770. The land had opened up after the French and Indian War, government wasn't settled, different colonies claimed the land, and the Crown wanted to know which faction they should back. There were treaties being negotiated with the Pennacook and the Hurons. You saw Mr James Maskelyne? The man who threatened to scalp you when you came for your night's entertainment?"

"Yes."

"Better if he had, I'm going to do something worse to you. Mr Maskelyne negotiated the Crown's first treaty with the Pennacook. Settlers paid it no mind, and there was war. It quite unhinged him. The Pennacook aren't forgiving on this point, a quick way to die is to walk in our thick pine forests with a red coat. My advice to the Crown was to back Ethan Allen and his Green Mountain Boys. My advice was ignored. I don't know why His Majesty sends out his spies, when he listens so little to them. I imagine you have wondered on the same issue, much of late. Oh just because I am in an asylum does not mean that I don't know what is going on in the world. I filed my reports and I awaited my next assignment, and I drank and whored to the extent that either of these occupations could be well pursued in this uncivilized land, and I met Taylor Mason.

"A learned man, he had settled with his family from Salem in the Massachusetts colony. He had a lovely little wife, Charlotte, a son Monck and a daughter Sarah. He was an intense man full of knowledge on topics as diverse as Chinese philosophy, Marcilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, Dr Franklin's experiments, codes and ciphers, waterworks, and above all astronomy. I had been mentioning the discovery of the new planet called the Georgium Sidus by Herschel. A great Symbol for our age, I called it, the widening of man's world by pure science, when he remarked on two things. Firstly that Herschel's discovery would not be the ending of our solar system, that there were planets beyond, and secondly it wasn't due to Herschel's ingenuity that the planet had been discovered.

"I expressed my surprise at his notions. Surely the Georgian planet, being twice the distance from the sun as Saturn, must be the true limit. But Mr Mason assured me that Uranus, using the name that the Germans called the planet, had at least three other planets beyond it. One of which he said was inhabited. Now you may wonder at the fact that I didn't run from this man at that moment since he was clearly one of those madmen who believe in extraterrestrial life, a hobbyhorse of many a Mystic, but Mr Mason had been so clear in his dialogue otherwise and so full of fascinating facts, I thought to keep his company.

"Our conversations ranged on many topics, and at one point he began to speak of the future. He had some very definite opinions on the way the future would unfold, and I placed many bets with him of the newly-minted New Connecticut pine-tree schillings on the topics. He won with uncanny accuracy. I made the mistake of mentioning this in my report, and the order came from King George himself that I discover the secret of this man's uncanny accuracy.

"I dedicated myself to this task, first by beginning to

act as though everything he said was sensible, for I indeed expected him to be in the service of some super-sensible entity that had knowledge of the future. I would in all things act as his disciple in the hopes that I would be of service to King George as well as answering to my own overweening curiosity.

"He told me that he had been in contact with a hidden race that dwelt in the deep hills engaged in mining. I expected that he meant some sort of Indian, for America as you know has seen its share of older races that have erected such curiosities as the Mounds near the Ohio river. He said that this race possessed great secrets of travel, and that he would be Initiated into them at a certain time. He said they were seldom open to the human race except at certain times of instability, when they used mental accelerants in the form of magical symbols to move the human race into something more useful for them.

"I believed very little of this, but pleaded wholeheartedly to be allowed to attend the secret conclaves of this group, so that I too might be useful to the group. He agreed that I might go to one of their gatherings. I was expecting some kind of witches' Sabbat. But I found something infinitely more horrible."

At this point Mr Brewster's voice began to tremble, and he began acting like a madman again – possessed of fears and giving many terrified glances at the ceiling of his cell.

"We went to a deep forest gorge in the unsettled Vermont woods, near Townshend. We approached dramatically at twilight from a rising path ending in a cleft boulder. A buzzing like the swarm of many bees could be heard, and I saw or thought I saw some large shape fly overhead as it passed along a magnificent terraced waterfall that frothed over the sheer bedrock. Above the tumbling stream rose high rock precipices crusted with strange lichens and honeycombed with alluring caves. We waited till night fell and then they came forth from the cave mouths, while others of their number flew down from the skies. There were a dozen or so of them. They were not human. They were like a great crab with six to twelve pairs of pincers not unlike a lobster, and great chitinous wings like a beetle's, and for heads there was a pulsing mass of pyramidal entrails. I saw them briefly in Mason's lanthorn's light, which he quickly doused. He spoke to them saying, 'This is the one who will tell much to Him in the Gulf, and will utter our spells at the correct time. He will tell the world of men of the World-of-the-Must-Be. He can not do otherwise, for he is a spy for one of mankind's kings.'

"I did not know that Mason knew I was a spy – I had pretended to be a veteran from Washington's army. I moved to run, but one of the creatures grabbed my arm. It had great strength in its pincer, much greater than I would have suspected its body had. Their bodies looked soft and brittle like a puffball, and they smelled of something long-dead. A dust or spore seemed to drift from its body from time to time. I began a violent coughing spell as the dust entered my lungs. I became dizzy and lost consciousness. I had a sort of Dream of great lucidity.

"I saw a series of scenes that made little sense to me. At first I saw the creatures in completely black rooms –

in fact I can not say in truth that I 'saw' them for a new sense wholly different than sight was mine. They were playing with globes, putting little pins in them in the manner a witch is said to torment a doll, then they would tie strings between these pins, which they could do with great spiderlike ease. When they had tied the globe up they would pass it to a creature whose form I could not make out who swallowed the globe. Some had many strings and others few.

"The next scene I saw was on Earth, at least I believed it to be Earth. There were great roads of tar being busily laid everywhere, and fast-moving carriages of metal speeding about these roads with men and women inside of them. There were great cities being built, but their pattern resembled the string models I had seen in the black chamber.

"Then I saw large metal cylinders with wings like birds, but these wings did not flap and they were moving through the air and their movement was charted on big maps and corresponded with one of the globes' string pattern.

"Then I saw men and women talking into small devices connected to the walls of their homes and businesses, and these devices were connected with wires that likewise resembled one of the globes.

"Then I saw vast numbers of men and women labouring in front of glowing boxes, their fingers flying over a usually silent array of keys, and a look of growing anxiety on their faces. These too were linked together. I could not understand the extreme – shall I say hellish? – agitation of these scenes. These men and women were working for some goal, but I could not begin to guess what goal could furrow so many brows. The world was filling with billions of men and women, they were everywhere like maggots on a ripe corpse, and they were all tied with strings to one another.

"Then I saw the world as from a great height, and it seemed that the world disappeared except for the netting. It was roughly round, and it squirmed in the darkness of space. The creatures visited it at certain nodes, taking away from it some yellowish substance, that seemed to serve as food for another creature that lay in a dark hole of space, which was blacker than black.

"The great round net grew tighter and tighter, until it began to resemble nothing less than an eyeball, at which point the creatures flew to it in the millions and attached themselves to it and began to move it entire through space. As it passed by me I tried to read its expression: it seemed divided between anger and fear. The creatures carried it to the great dark hole where some vast creature oozed forth and attached the eyeball to what might have been its face.

"Then I saw a series of practical designs for things called *telephone* and *telegraph*, and information on better surveying techniques and new forms of mathematics. Although I am untrained in these fields, these things burned themselves on my mind, I could draw any of them today.

"I came to lying in a different glen, my feet being washed by (what I later discovered to be) the Wantastiquet. There was no sign of Mason, nor of the hellish flying beings. I followed the stream downward and came upon some human habitation in a few hours, a pair of Scott hunters that fed me and escorted me to the village of Athol.

"I eventually made my way back to Concord, where I dis-

covered that Mr Mason had gone missing. I said nothing in my reports about my encounter with Mason, but then a more horrifying discovery came in a month's time. Mason's body had been found near Townshend. It had signs of being frozen, and most peculiarly the top of the skull had been sawn off and his brains had been eaten by wild animals.

"It was a month later still that one of the creatures began visiting my house on moonless nights. I heard it land and gave a general alarm, but it possessed a power akin to the Mesmerism so recently a fashion in France. It could make my servants sleep. It told me that Mason was alive and well on a planet beyond the Georgian, which it called Yuggoth. The special mode of travel that Mason had spoken of was accomplished by surgically removing his brain and placing it in a metal cylinder. A similar cylinder was reserved for me when I completed my mission. I must write my visions and send them to King George.

"I resisted this demonic request, but on every night of the new moon, or on nights when clouds held the lunar radiations at bay, the creatures came to me again and again. They delighted in telling me secrets, each more horrible than the one before. They spoke of Purposes so alien to mankind that such things as we poor worms find significant such as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, are but local attributes of a race both negligible and temporary. And as I learned these things, I became less and less human and more caught up in thinking of the Cosmos, so that I cared not for my servants' trouble, nor the essentials of my spying mission, nor even for things like nation and church. I could have stopped listening at any time, I guess, but my life had always been based on the collecting of secrets.

"In the end I sent my notes to King George. I explained that such inventions could vastly empower the nation which had them, but that some time would have to pass before suitable materials could be made to produce the inventions. In the meantime a series of international protocols would need to be worked out to allow such inventions to come into being and link the world.

"I never received an answer from him."

I asked Mr Brewster what happened then, why was he so afraid of the entities that he had so willingly served.

"After I had sent the packet to King George, I went to the woods ready to seek out the creatures from Yuggoth. Some nights I heard them flying overhead, but they would not come to me. I lived for half a year in the woods, and I came to worry about the coming of the Vermont winter. I did not know why they had forsaken me, but on a frosty night in October they came to my tent. They thanked me for having played my part in their prank. What I had done was very funny, it fit the purpose of Him in the Gulf. The joke, they explained to me, was the supreme Purpose of the One they served, a joke that led to screaming and ecstasy, a joke that was of the same Essence as the playing of the blind flute-players at the Throne of the Laughing One Who Doth Cry. It was the same sort of joke as the Great Ones played, calling their jokes matter and energy, time and dimension. They were very, very thankful. They would play a last little joke on me. They would show me such sights as were too strong to be seen by a human mind. They would show

the great tedium of trans-stellar travel, where I would see nothing for aeons, they would show me the horrors of the bodies of the creatures that lived on the Georgian planet, they would take me to a place beyond the Rim of Space and Time. And they would eat my thoughts as they did this. It would be very, very funny.

"Then they left me. For some months I contemplated suicide, but they had done something to me that rendered me incapable of the act. I tried to aim a pistol at myself, or claim myself with a hangman's rope, but a strange paralysis would overtake me at the crucial moment.

"I lost not only the will to live, but such simple wills as the desire to eat or keep myself clean. I merely lay about, sleeping wherever I fell, until the good people of New Connecticut placed me in this asylum. They will come for me some day. I have been thinking a great deal about what that will be like. It won't be the heaven that religions promise for discarnate intelligences – maybe that whole myth comes from mankind's interactions with the creatures from Yuggoth, a sort of supreme jest. No, it will be like when you scrape your thumb. A rawness like when your crotch has been turned red from riding hard all day long. Except it will be all over, extending in infinite length from my naked brain, and it will go on forever, through the long spaces of time as I drift from star to star in one of their metal cylinders, with them flying beside me in the infinite night, their vast wings catching an aether so fine as to be unknown to our senses.

"And then there will be the other scenes. Not just Yuggoth and Yaddith, but worlds that I will need special senses even to see, senses that were never meant for mankind. It won't be all terror, it will be ecstasy too, torment sublime that will melt my humanity away like a candle stub thrown in the fire by a wilful child. And they will laugh in their voice like the buzzing of a thousand bees."

He told many other things, things I thought too horrid to write down, even in this my private journal.

I thought of asking whether his prophecies had ever been received in London, but I decided it would not be a wise thing to inquire of. If such scientific ideas had been received, they would be too valuable to mention to anyone. My mere knowledge would make me a candidate for death. I tried very hard to dismiss Mr Brewster's warnings. Certainly after my one visit I never returned to the Newfane Asylum.

I did however send Christmas packages to him, German *stollen* and jams and cheeses. Even a small brandy; although I am sure that was consumed by the guards.

Three years later when New Connecticut changed its name to Vermont and became the 14th state in the fledgling United States, I received some distressing news. It seemed that one moonless night Mr James Maskelyne, the would-be Indian, did manage to get an axe from the guards and scalp Mr Brewster in what my informant called a "a novel and repulsive manner," and that furthermore Mr James Maskelyne, with the cleverness of the truly mad, had been able to hide the axe from the guards when they sought it.

I must believe that this is the case, for otherwise I

would look at the sky when it is dark and think that somewhere so many thousands of airless dark miles above, something, something that would smell of rot if I met it in the clean air of Earth, is laughing in a voice like a million bees.

## For Ramsey Campbell

**Don Webb**, when asked recently about his many magazine appearances worldwide, replied: "I have been published in magazines (from the smallest fanzine to *Wired*), about 250 times – eleven times in *Interzone*, ten times in *Asimov's*, once in *F&SF*, four times in *SF Age*, and so on. The oddest magazines would have to be *Trucker's USA*, a giveaway available at truck-stops which featured my story about aliens trading gold for bread on a bakery truck, and *Prakapalakanka Literature*, a Bengali avant-garde journal that published an experimental piece of mine in Bengali and English. I had a few sf stories in the Norwegian anarchist publication *Gateavis* until my editor there was tossed out of the collective, and of course I've been in lots of little arty magazines like *Iron* in the UK or *Fiction International* in the USA."

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# The Sound of the City... and the Call of the Cosmos

Gary Westfahl

As those who knew me in college will attest, rock'n'roll music was once the passion of my life: I spent hours at any available piano, teaching myself to play every song on the radio and writing hundreds of my own songs. Even as I later settled into a career as a teacher and writer, I occasionally returned to the subject of rock music, as when I authored brief entries on "The Beatles" and "Rock Video" for *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. So, after one participant in the "fictionmags" Internet discussion group raised the issue of the relationship between science fiction and rock'n'roll music, arguing that the issue had been insufficiently explored, I should have been inspired to pursue the topic at length. Strangely, I wasn't.

It is hardly difficult to compile a list of relevant works. Rock music that displays the influence of science fiction? David Bowie's "Space Oddity," "Starman," and other songs from his Ziggy Stardust phase. The Rolling Stones' "Two Thousand Light Years from Home," Elton John's "Rocket Man," and Jefferson Starship's *Blows Against the Empire*. The rock-opera version of *The War of the Worlds*, featuring songs

by Justin Hayward of the Moody Blues. The music of Hawkwind and Klaatu. Songs from the musicals *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Little Shop of Horrors*. Billy Idol's *Cyberpunk*. Science fiction that displays the influence of rock music? Chester Anderson's *The Butterfly Kid*. Norman Spinrad's "The Big Flash." Michael Moorcock's Jerry Cornelius stories. Gregory Benford's "Doing Lennon," Edward Bryant's "Stone," John Grant's *The Truth about the Flaming Ghoulies*, and John Shirley's *Eclipse*. Stories by Howard Waldrop and the early novels of Allan Steele. Further, these connections have not been entirely unnoticed by commentators and scholars: the entry on "Music" in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* discusses several of these titles and others, and one critical anthology, Michael A. Morrison's *Trajectories of the Fantastic*, features a section on "Fantastic Rock" with essays about Bowie and Moorcock.

Yet I was not eager to examine any of these works; while sometimes striking, they were not interesting as a group and did not appear to be of central importance to their respective

genres. To express the point as I did in my "fictionmags" response, consider creating an album of *The Best of Science Fiction Rock'n'Roll* and an anthology of *The Best of Rock'n'Roll Science Fiction*. These would be easy to assemble, but no one would ever mistake them for *The Best of Rock'n'Roll* or *The Best of Science Fiction*; with rare exceptions, these compilations would exclude the works that a scholar of rock music and a scholar of science fiction would need to discuss in order to convey the essence of their subjects.

To explain why this may be true will require some generalizations easily open to challenge, but being challenged is not, after all, a novel experience for me at this point. First, let us accept the position of *Time* magazine, in choosing Albert Einstein as its Person of the Century, that the tremendous progress of science has been the most important development of the last hundred years. In at least three respects, its multitudinous advances are profoundly challenging our understanding of what it means to be human. New technologies like automo-



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biles, airplanes, atomic energy, satellite communication, and computers are significantly altering all aspects of human existence, from daily routines to global politics. An improved understanding of genetics and biotechnology is providing us with the power to change the human mind and body in previously unthinkable fashions, perhaps crafting people who are immortal, superintelligent, or augmented by mechanical organs and memory implants. Space travel and a growing knowledge of the universe engender the genuine possibility of contact with alien intelligences, which would forever alter how we see ourselves. In all these ways, then, modern science requires that we ponder the implications of forthcoming, and fundamental, changes in the human condition.

Unfortunately, early 20th-century literature, increasingly preoccupied with character studies, stylistic experimentation, and recycling ancient mythology, could not and would not address these issues. Thus, there arose the need for a new type of narrative, science fiction, which implausibly blended the dime novel, utopia, Gothic novel, satire, travel tale, popular-science essay, and other influences as a new vehicle for explorations of diverse aspects of our potential inhumanity.

However, while it is both exciting and necessary, contemplating such prospects as revolutionary new gadgetry, the advent of homo superior, or the arrival of a message from Arc-turus engenders a natural counterreaction: a desire to reaffirm the human condition, to delight in the most basic aspects of everyday existence, to be reinvigorated by the simple pleasures that have characterized our lives for millions of years. Yet the first part of the 20th century also failed to provide a proper medium for these impulses: all forms of the written word were ill-suited to convey such primal emotions, and most forms of music, ranging from discordant orchestral compositions to experimental jazz and urbane Broadway show tunes, seemed too arcane or sophisticated for the task. Thus, there arose the need for a new type of music, rock'n'roll, which implausibly blended the blues, jazz, folk music, country music, Gospel music, and other influences as a new vehicle for expressions of diverse aspects of our enduring humanity.

Whenever I think of rock'n'roll music, I recall the most basic of the human senses – touch, which we share with even the most primitive micro-organisms – and the four sensitivities of human touch: heat, cold, pressure, and pain. This is one way to explain what rock'n'roll is all about: the heat of sexual passion, the chill of unrequited or lost love, the pressure of trying to

cope with an ever-changing technological society, and the pain of failing to do so. One could say with equal justice that rock music celebrates the direct stimulation of our pleasure centres, whether by sex, drugs, a fresh breeze while driving down the open road, or the thrill of catching a wave on a sunny beach. Conversely, rock'n'roll rejects artifice, artificiality, and any alterations in traditional human qualities; thus, when Ray Davies of the Kinks was asked to write something about organ transplants for the film *Percy*, he responded with a protest song, "God's Children," singing "we are all God's children, / and they've got no right to change us, / we gotta go back the way the good Lord made us."

Donald A. Wollheim once discerned a vast metanarrative underlying science fiction – a near-future of disastrous problems caused by new technology, gradual human expansion into space, encounters with alien beings, and an eventual approach to God – its essence epitomized by the title of a collection of Konstantin Tsiolkovsky's works, *The Call of the Cosmos*. There is also a metanarrative underlying rock'n'roll, though true experts in that music could better articulate it. The story involves the growing urbanization of American life – hence, the title of Charlie Gillett's study of rock'n'roll, *The Sound of the City* – as simple country boys like Johnny B. Goode discover the joys of

city life (fast cars, loose women, electric guitars) even as they sometimes long to return to a peaceful rural existence. Young men and women encounter an increasingly restrictive civilization and cry for freedom; they observe social inequities and demand justice. Defying conventional values in their clothing and sexual preferences, they flirt with crime and violence, indulge in alcohol and drugs, look for easy money, and break all the rules. Their stirring anthems include "Roll Over Beethoven," "Jailhouse Rock," "Satisfaction," "Like a Rolling Stone," "Born to Be Wild," "Won't Get Fooled Again," "Walk on the Wild Side," "School's Out," "Free Bird," "We Will Rock You," "She Works Hard for the Money," "Burning Down the House," "Stray Cat Strut," "Smells Like Teen Spirit," and "You Oughta Know." For all of rock's assertive simplicities, it projects a rich, complex, and evocative story that continues to move generation after generation of young people almost half a century after its emergence.

But it doesn't have a heck of a lot to do with science fiction.

Clearly, I am constructing a grand conceit: ignoring new media created by technology (such as film, radio, television, and video games), I argue that two major new forms of expression emerged in the 20th century – science fiction and rock'n'roll music – both assembled by necessity out of disparate older genres, one designed to ponder potential new realities and the other designed to validate enduring values. Like any grand conceit, it should be greeted with scepticism, and given its topics, that is only fitting – since, as forms largely created for and embraced by marginalized youth (science fiction for nerds, rock'n'roll for hoods), both encourage a healthy scepticism for recognized authority, whether it is Sir Arthur C. Clarke's scepticism about an elderly scientist announcing that something is impossible or Carl Perkins' scepticism about some nefarious individual poised to step on his Blue Suede Shoes.

One sceptical response would be based on the large numbers of related works, some listed above, that even a lethargic researcher could readily identify. If so many rock songs reference science fiction, and so many science fiction works reference rock music, doesn't there have to be some sort of affinity between the two? But this isn't necessarily true: since science fiction and rock'n'roll are both dynamic mixtures of egregiously dissimilar progenitors, they are naturally ready to combine with almost any conceivable partner. The existence of science fiction rock'n'roll, then, is not especially significant when one considers that

rock'n'roll has also been blended with opera, jazz, classical music, political commentary, and comedy; and rock'n'roll science fiction also is only one of many unlikely combinations.

More to the point, I maintain that rock songs influenced by science fiction are not really that numerous and are definitely not that important. Almost invariably, science fiction in a rock star's *oeuvre* seems either an unfortunate phase that the artist thankfully grew out of or a disastrous career-ending move. I mean, who could sanely listen to Bowie's "Rebel, Rebel" and wax nostalgic about the good old days of "Space Oddity"? And it is perhaps not a coincidence that the Carpenters had their first big flop when they covered Klaatu's "Calling Occupants of Interplanetary Craft" or that Billy Idol's once-thriving career came to a screeching halt with the release of his *Cyberpunk* album. In the same way, rock'n'roll science fiction stories such as those listed above are generally lesser moments in their authors' careers; a genre born to wrestle with the largest implications of our ongoing confrontation with the universe and our burgeoning abilities to alter its realities can seem anemic and cramped when it focuses exclusively on mundane human drives – just as rock music can sound pretentious or nause-

atingly sentimental when it addresses aliens, robots, and spaceships.

Another line of objection would focus on the fact that many people, like myself, are tremendously fond of both rock music and science fiction; doesn't that suggest that there is some strong connection between them? But this isn't necessarily so either. Here, we encounter the basic fallacy that underlies repeated efforts to relate these two contrasting forms: the idea that if I am interested in X, and if I am interested in Y, then X and Y must be related in some way. Nonsense! Human beings are, or should be, complicated and multifaceted creatures who can readily respond to the allure of contradictory forces. Someone on the "fictionmags" list surprised me the other day by commenting on the outcome of an American football game; if he is a fan of both science fiction and football, then must we posit that there is some close relationship between science fiction and football? It makes more sense to believe that he is simply a man of variegated passions who is sometimes moved by science fiction and sometimes moved by football, and there is nothing wrong, or truly incongruous, about that.

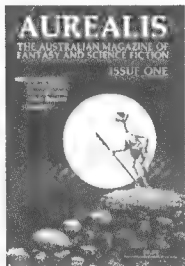
Therefore, I suggest that an attraction to both science fiction and rock'n'roll is simply a complete and

appropriate response to contemporary times: we should sometimes be intrigued by and receptive to the possibility of revolutionary changes in the human condition, and we should sometimes be inspired and stimulated by a reaffirmation of our most ancient human urges and desires. But I submit that we cannot felicitously do these things at the same time. A friend once proposed that there were three secrets to successful cooking: everything tastes better with mushrooms; everything tastes better with peanut butter; and mushrooms and peanut butter do not go well together. Science fiction and rock music similarly strike me as experiences to be relished alternately, but not simultaneously; some things are best communicated through stories, while other things are best communicated through songs. In a sense, though, it is not surprising that so many writers and musicians keep coming up with ill-advised combinations of story and song; for as already suggested, both science fiction and rock music encourage their audiences to defy conventional wisdom, move beyond the ordinary, and attempt the impossible. And that may be the only quality that these forms have in common.

Gary Westfahl

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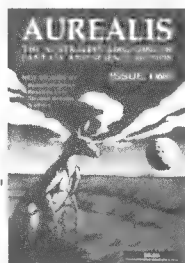
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There is nothing particularly hip about being a writer. Writing, nowadays, is a decidedly unfashionable thing, for all that we may pretend otherwise. Of course there have always been writers who achieve a certain counter-cultural credibility, not unlike that of rock stars or filmmakers: Kerouac, Mishima, Burroughs, Ballard. But recent years have seen increasingly desperate efforts to make writers attractive to a media-dominated culture. Writers must not only seem interesting in an immediate, cheaply journalistic sense; they must also deal with fashionably controversial subject matter.

It's a little depressing. But never mind, time brings its own justice: it's a fair bet that those innumerable '90s youth-cult extravaganzas and drug-fuelled odysseys – those books that might have been written, we are meant to believe, by Proust on acid, or Burroughs on even more acid – will almost certainly be going cheap in the bargain bins of the future. In fiction, hipness is a treacherous thing. There is a difference, however, between novels which deal with the subject of hipness, and those which try to embody and exploit it. Elizabeth Hand's new novel *Black Light* (Flamingo, £6.99) is an example of the former; Steve Beard's *Digital Leatherette* (Codex, £8.95) of the latter.

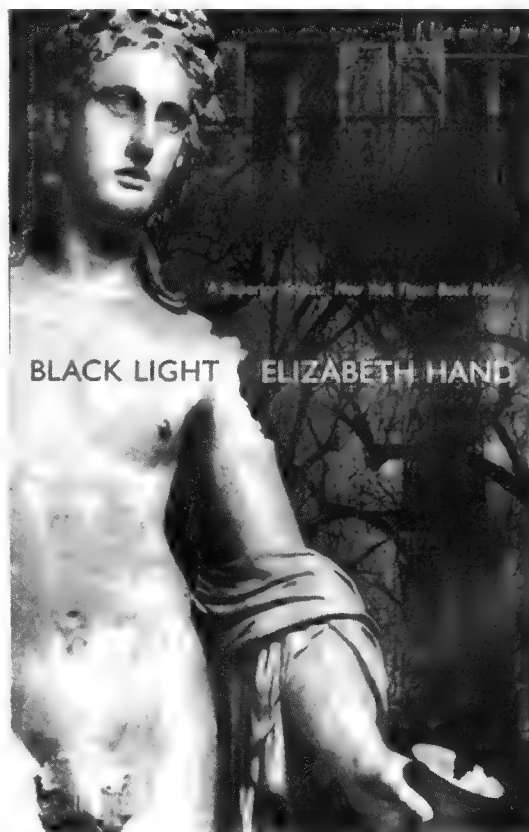
Hand's last novel was the remarkable millennial fantasy *Glimmering* (1997). *Black Light* is also about a time of change, but of a very different sort. In essence this is a new take on that American loss-of-innocence genre which encompasses such diverse works as *American Graffiti* and *The Ice Storm* and *Stand by Me*, *The Catcher in the Rye* and Robert McCammon's *Boy's Life*, *Something Wicked This Way Comes* and Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero*.

Not that Hand's heroine, like Ellis's hero, seems to have much innocence to lose: Charlotte ("Lit") Moylan is one of those spoilt, bored American rich kids with nothing left to learn about sex and drugs. Her parents are both famous actors and live in Kamensic, a fictional and mysteriously magical town in upstate New York, populated largely by celebrities. The time is the early 1970s. Sixties counter-culture is still going strong, but turning sour. At the heart of that culture is cult movie director and magus-like manipulator Axel Kern, a sort of combination Roman Polanski and Andy Warhol, famous – or infamous – for his orgiastic parties.

Kern inhabits Bolerium, a massive, dilapidated mansion which looms above Kamensic like a medieval castle. The novel recounts the Halloween weekend when Bolerium becomes the scene of Kern's ultimate bash, and Lit

and her friends Hillary, Ali and Jamie are drawn catastrophically into his orbit. Kern, we discover, is much more than he seems – in fact, more than human.

Hand boldly mingles realism and fantasy. Anyone who was alive – and young – in the '70s will recognize her descriptions of the clothes, the drugs, the parties, the pretensions. Details are brilliantly drawn: "A joint was still smouldering on the sink, the porcelain



## Varieties of Hip

Tom Arden



REVIEWED

beneath it amber with resin..." Better yet, Hand never plays all this for easy parody in *Ab Fab* fashion, but succeeds, rather, in the more difficult task of recreating the real texture and poignancy of a vanished era. This is a novel filled with the smells of marijuana and of vinyl LPs, the swirling paisley of an Indian print press, the rattle of thin, silvery bracelets on a girl's wrist.

Whether the fantasy works as well as the realism is a moot point. When Hand breaks from Lit's point of view, inserting third-person chapters about the mysterious Professor Balthazar Walnick and the weird goings-on "in another house nearly a thousand miles from Kamensic," the narrative pressure drops. Of course Walnick, and the weird goings-on, are soon to play a major part in Lit's destiny – but, after the vividness of the early part of the novel, the ancient mythology which later comes to the fore seems a bit musty, and all a bit much. In Kamensic and its teenage denizens, Hand has created a scenario which is in itself strangely magical; what enchants us is the mythology, as it were, of America and American adolescence. The classical mythology detracts from, rather than adds to, the novel's magic.

But that magic is still considerable. *Black Light* is about the painful transition from one era to another. Broadly, in the tale of Lit and her friends, Hand's subject is the end of adolescence; specifically, in Lit's escape from Kamensic, Hand writes about the death of hippiedom and the birth of punk. The novel ends optimistically, looking towards the excitements of late-'70s New York City. One almost suspects that a sequel is in the

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REVIEWS

offing. If so, I look forward to it greatly.

Hand's chapter-titles have particular resonance for those who remember the era: "Helter Skelter," "Children of the Revolution," "Houses of the Holy," "Harvest," and so on. There is a striking moment when Lit sees a punk for the first time: "The only person I'd ever seen who looked remotely like him was Lou Reed on the cover of *Transformer*..." Later, she describes the impact made by Kraftwerk's "Autobahn," with its "muted voices chanting over a synthesised drone." I sometimes wondered how much all this would mean to readers unfamiliar with the references.

Pop-culture allusions are a danger for the novelist. In Bret Easton Ellis's drug-sodden college novel *The Rules of Attraction* – by far his least impressive book – there is a scene in which we are told that "Reel Around the Fountain" by The Smiths is playing in the background. If you know this evocative song, this means a lot; if you don't, I imagine the scene would fall flat. The allusion is a shortcut to emotional resonance. In a powerfully-written novel like *Black Light*, the allusions offer simply one more layer of meaning, available to those who can pick them up. In Ellis's novel – and many would-be hip novels by writers far less talented – the trendy name-checks are often all there is.

Supposedly hip subject matter – youth culture and the like – works best in fiction when it is handled at a certain distance, by writers who see its evanescence. Donna Tartt's bestselling thriller *The Secret History* deals with the same 1980s college milieu as *The Rules of Attraction*, but is a vastly superior book. One reason why is that the hip, college-kids-get-wasted stuff is contained within the cadences of a classic style. In a tradition which dates back to that earlier great youth-cult chronicler, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Tartt sees beyond the moment. She is frequently elegiac.

Elizabeth Hand is in this tradition. British writer Steve Beard, by contrast, would appear to have no idea that it exists. *Digital Leatherette* is a novel which tries so hard to be hip that it is beyond parody. One could do worse than to quote the blurb. This, we are told,

is an ethno-techno London cypherpunk (*sic*) novel. Featuring in a popcult landscape of pre-millennial tension and ruined future dreams are elements such as: the Rave at the End of the World in Battersea Power Station; UFOs over Heathrow; street riots sponsored by fashion designers; semiotic terrorists

setting their sights on fetish object the Stone of Scone; MI6 agents running their own reality cop-shows; a stock market crash triggered by a star in the sky; a dangerous new drug called Starflower; barcode tattoos and the assassination of Queen Elizabeth II.

If all this sounds exciting, I should add that the novel contains nothing so bourgeois as a plot, or even characters in the usual sense, and is written entirely in short sections intended to represent e-mails, transcripts of internet relay chat, office memoranda, fragments of film scripts, magazine articles and so on, all set out in a wide range of typefaces with numerous odd spellings.

Modern versions – if there are any – of the young man in the *Punch* cartoon who says "One doesn't write about anything, dear aunt" will love this book. Others will experience different feelings. Undoubtedly Beard has a facility with bizarre and hip-seeming ideas and effects. In this book, there is always a record in the background. There are name-checks to every techno hit and cult film the zeitgeist-surfer could want. As a catalogue of hip references, *Digital Leatherette* may have some value. As a novel, it has none. The few interesting bits are all derivative. The London mysticism has been done better – much better – by Peter Ackroyd and Iain Sinclair; the interspersed film

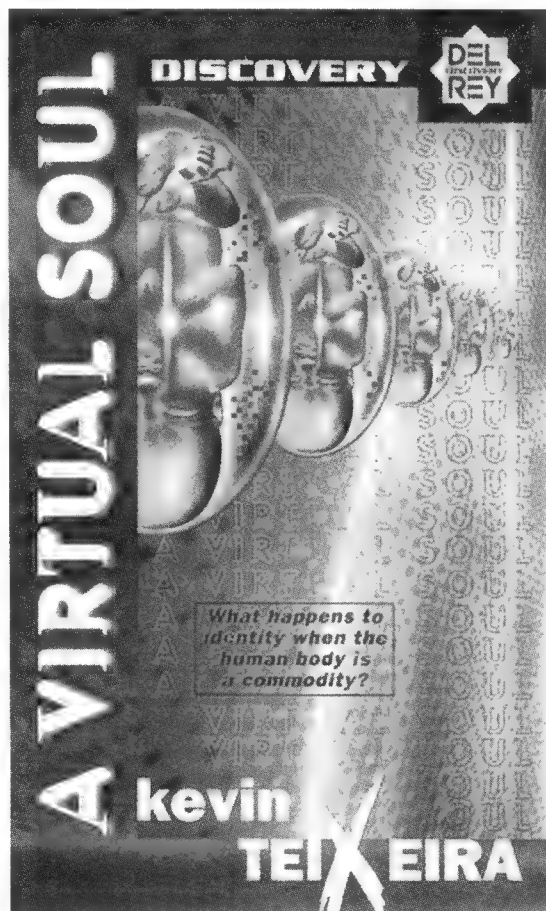
script might almost be lifted from Derek Jarman's *Jubilee*.

Experimentalists from Sterne to Joyce to Bester to Brunner to Douglas Coupland to Geoff Ryman have used odd-seeming literary techniques in order to reveal more deeply their characters and their worlds. Beard simply obscures whatever he might be saying – which isn't much, I suspect, except "Look how hip I am." He calls *Digital Leatherette* an "ambient novel." I'd call it a bore. Still, it is only fair to add that the book carries a front-cover commendation from William Gibson, no less, who describes it as "an exuberant, neurologically-specific, neo-Blakeian riff-collage." Well, there you are.

Gibson's shadow also looms large over a very different book, American writer Kevin Teixeira's *A Virtual Soul* (Del Rey, \$6.99). The novel, Teixeira's first, is set in the near-ish future, when a genetically engineered class known as the "tubies" provide society with slave labour. Cognitive programmers called "em-printers" implant the brains of the tubies with appropriate personalities.

Teixeira's hero is Josh Nunes, em-printer extraordinaire, and in effect a slave himself, owned by a large corporation. The intrigue begins when Josh is forced to deliver a female tubie known as a "pleasure doll" to her new owner in Japan. But the pleasure doll is not what she seems; she is, as the reader knows already, the brilliant, beautiful surgeon – to say "female surgeon" seems irresistible in this context – who has been kidnapped and had her brain wiped in a violent prologue. For some of us, there will be unintended comedy in this character, who is introduced as Dr Kimberly Newman – and thereafter referred to as Kim. In any case, Josh and Kim Newman are soon well and truly at it ("Slowly she began to slide up and down on him," etc.) and it's not long before the pair of them are on the run and battling against nefarious forces.

Promoted as a "Del Rey Discovery," Teixeira is a solid pop storyteller of the traditional sort. *A Virtual Soul* is a well-paced, readable sf thriller, but essentially this is *Neuromancer* as airport fiction – literary bits carefully excised; much info-dumping and signposting – with biotech replacing cybertech as the gosh-wow factor. Of course there is an attempt to be "thought-provoking" – moral dilemmas of our hi-tech future, and all that – but one need only compare this book to virtually any Greg Egan story, or to *Neuromancer* itself, to judge how well Teixeira succeeds in this aim. If *Neuromancer* were a classic pop song, this would be the cover version by Boyzone or Steps.





One turns, not without relief, to Storm Constantine. In an already long list of books, Constantine has established herself as one of the more interesting contemporary British fantasy writers. Stylistically sophisticated, her work is characterized by a sexual daring and appealingly provocative perversity somewhat reminiscent of Angela Carter or Anne Rice.

Constantine's recent novels have used contemporary settings, but in *Sea Dragon Heir* (Gollancz, hb £16.99, tp £9.99) she begins a new series set in the fantasyland of Caradore, where the ruling house has been conquered by a foreign empire. Two hundred years before the novel begins, the last heir of Caradore was forced to swear alle-

giance to the fire god Madragore, breaking his magical links with the sea dragons. By now, a new generation has almost forgotten that Caradore was once independent, and the legends of the sea dragons lie in abeyance. All that changes when Constantine's heroine Pharinet comes to maturity. Initiated into the mysterious Sisterhood of the Dragon, Pharinet realizes that her beloved brother Valraven is Sea Dragon Heir, and must soon take his rightful place on the throne.

This both is and is not conventional fantasy fare. The strange lands, the magic and the mystery seem familiar enough, but several things lift this book above most would-be fantasy blockbusters. For a start, Constantine

really can write. To create a prose which is both lush and sensual on the one hand, and taut and economical on the other – the story moves much faster than is common in this genre – is no easy task, but Constantine manages it with ease. The characters – Pharinet in particular – are not flat hero-and-villain figures but complex individuals, while the plot is no hackneyed Tolkien rip-off but genuinely intriguing. Incest figures prominently, and there is real darkness. It's all a long way from David Eddings. It's perhaps even hip – in the best sense, of course.

**Tom Arden**

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Spot the deliberate errors in the following:

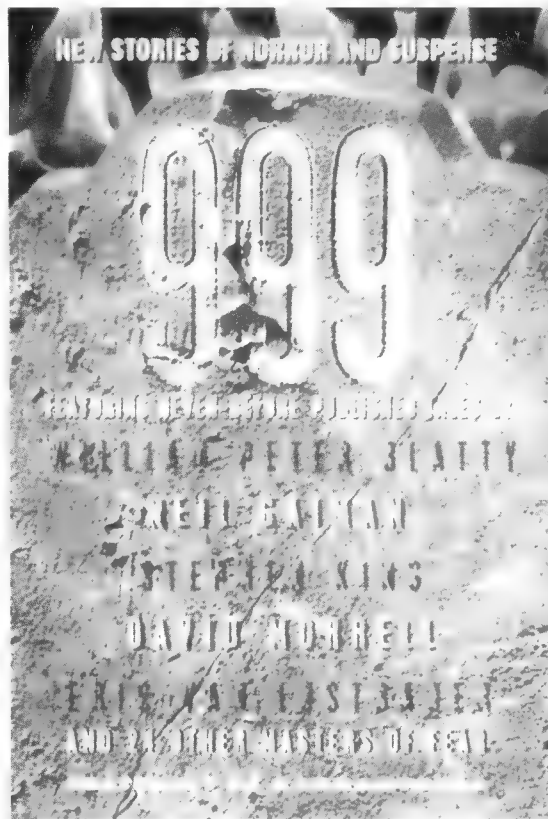
Horror fiction, here in the UK, is a thriving organ in the body of the publishing industry, with fan demand stripping shelves of titles on a weekly basis, with leading writers laughing their collective way into the land of milk and honey, and with newcomers to the genre being welcomed by lucrative three-hardback deals on a regular basis.

The point need not be laboured, perhaps, but because horror fiction is an icy distance away from its most recent heyday (although no obsequies are required yet either) we should ask, seriously, what's gone wrong? Such work as is still being published in the field is of a good, strong standard; there are certain publishers (some of them independent) who are willing and able to fork out the necessary money. But we should not gloss over the fact that several of what we all assumed to have been our best-established novelists have been stranded on the shore, gulping for a publisher's air. And we must conclude (for it is not a difficult deduction to make) that we, the readers, have simply grown uninterested. The question begged, of course, is: *why?* Books (and publishing matter in general) being so ridiculously expensive does not help the situation, but there must be more to it than that.

When Al Sarrantonio, editor of *999: New Stories of Horror and Suspense* (Avon, \$27.50) explains his reasons for the title ("a contraction of the year the book is published, here at the cusp of the millennium; and 666 inverted – which means that the title makes sense even if the booksellers stack it upside-down"), the British reader can squeeze out one more, sardonic, interpretation. It is the number we dial for Emergency Services; so will this be the team of paramedics that batters on the poor heart of our

## Stories from the Belly of the Whale

David Mathew



beloved genre, or touches its greying lips? Sarrantonio again: "Revolution or celebration? You choose."

We'll choose. In America, the horror scene is healthier at present, and we began to hear tell of 999 before it reached our shores: the astonishing word-rate payments, the inclusion of writers (Morrell, King) who do not participate often in this sort of thing... As rumoured as the beast, then, it lumbers towards us; enormous, they say (a cute page count of 666), unstoppable, beautiful and not like any other – the leviathan! It's certainly one of the most interesting whales of all time, and present in the belly, predominantly by male American writers, are 29 tales: short stories, novellas, and one telescoped novel; if you want a high return for your outlay, this is an excellent choice to make. Hard-hitters such as Joyce Carol Oates and Eric Van Lustbader (didn't he drop the "Van" a while back?) are present with powerful work. Kim Newman provides a tale called "Amerikanski Dead at the Moscow Morgue," which continues the interest he showed in the Soviet Union in the series of tales he wrote with Eugene Byrne. It's a muscular, nicely-turned story, and as the first of the book's offerings, in completely the wrong place. It's like trying to drive up the hill in fourth gear.

The roll call carries on: F. Paul Wilson, Chet Williamson (haven't seen much from him over here in a while), Tim Powers, Thomas Ligotti, Sarrantonio himself, Gene Wolfe ("The Tree is My Hat" is the best title in the volume, for my money); Edward Bryant, Neil Gaiman, Joe R. Lansdale, Bentley Little: impressive inclusions, all. Thomas M. Disch gives "The Owl and the Pussycat," a very strange story involving teddybears, while Nancy A. Collins, with "Catfish Gal Blues" takes us further from her own *Sonja Blue*, and closer to the good George R. R. Martin of *Fevre Dream*: you can almost smell

the crawfish pie or jambalaya in this great Southern piece.

Ramsey Campbell's "The Entertainment" reminds us that entertainment works one way: for the other person the performance is work – and then, naturally, he takes that into the bone, or to another level... and homes for old people won't seem the same ever again. "Rio Grande Gothic" by David Morrell has a policeman fascinated to know why persons unknown see fit to abandon a shoe on a particular stretch of road every night. Ed Gorman's "Angie" is especially bleak, even among present company; the eponymous character finds it hard to accept that the ne'er-do-well she has fallen in with is planning kill his own son because he (the son) knows that Dad killed Mom. Is it Angie to the rescue?

One of the very few low points is "Des Saucisses, Sans Doute" by Peter Schneider. It's like watching a man pounding a sheet of metal with a sledgehammer. At first the violence seems to have a point, so you watch, honestly believing that he might be a craftsman, intending to sculpt. But then it becomes clear that he is pounding simply for the sake of pounding. Forget it, and read Michael Marshall Smith's "The Book of Irrational Numbers" – a fascinating story which briefly brings to mind Geoff Ryman's comment in the introduction to 253 about how reassuring it is to learn that every number has a *meaning*. Smith's story, as much as anything else, explores how such meanings can replace an individual's sense of reality. We have a first-person narrative in which a protagonist's life – and all its basic and not-so-basic – functions can be quantified. No one ever need fear numbers again: it is perfectly sufficient to fear those who *do not* fear numbers; those, in fact, who form odd relationships with the figures (curvy eights, prodding ones) in their head.

"The Road Virus Heads North" by Stephen King: a writer of horror fiction buys a painting of a pointed-toothed young man at a yard sale (obviously), not knowing that the picture will change little by little, and will show the places where it has been taken – places where the pointed-toothed young man, in real life, pays a visit with a very sharp tool. T. E. D. Klein (a pleasure to find here) gives a beautifully understated piece that examines the connection between people and their houses. Which leads us to "Elsewhere" by William Peter Blatty, the novel mentioned above, which seems at first – in its portrayal of a ghastly female real-estate developer – to be the start of a long haul. But once the collected team of experts and sceptics get to the house that the real-estate lady is determined to prove not haunted (the better to sell it) mat-

ters heat up. Or cool down, to be precise. It's a little bit like Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, but explores the nature of time, of dream, of memory. Intensely moving, and a fitting, elegiac end to an extraordinary anthology.

## As the publishing details which follow will suggest, *The Hoegbotton Guide to The Early History of Ambergris* by Duncan Shriek

(Necropolitan Press, \$7.99) is not a book by Duncan Shriek, nor indeed has it been published by any company called Hoegbotton. Both Shriek and Hoegbotton are wayward inventions of Jeff VanderMeer, and you might already be able to see what is occurring. Ambergris, a place that never was, with its bloody ordinations, its coups, sex, unreliable monks, "remarkable structures," revolting menus; its unbelievable mushrooms and fondness for elephants and whales, is being storied by an historian named Shriek. Story One. As with any historian (and as opposed to any novelist), he is faced with situations that have existed outside his own consciousness, and he must confront the maelstrom of already-constituted events, from which he will pluck the facts he wishes to include.

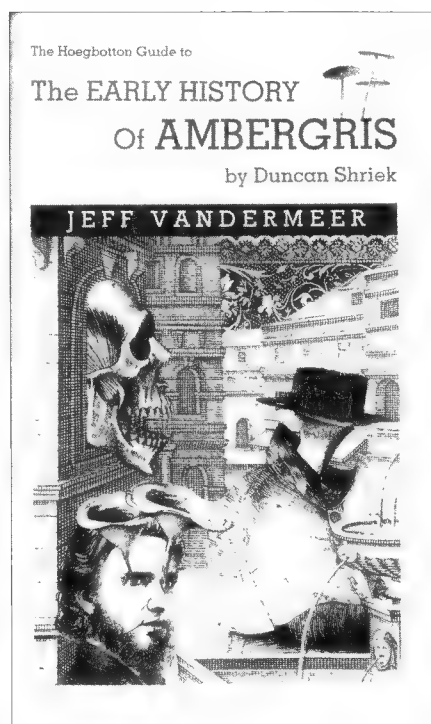
Thing is, Shriek also wants in on the tale, so that what the chronicle omits or subordinates might be picked up in the footnotes which make up approximately a quarter of the book. "I should add to footnote 2 that the most interesting information will be included only in footnote form," Shriek warns us on page one, "and I will endeavour to include as many footnotes as possi-

ble. Indeed, information alluded to in footnote form will later be expanded upon in the main text, thus confusing any of you who have decided not to read the footnotes." Story Two. The pre-Joycean narrator figure who chaperoned the reader round the action here, under VanderMeer's auspices, makes a reappearance.

We're not done, though. Tackle this, yes, as a work of imagined history, or to a certain extent a character study of Shriek; but let's not forget to look at it as a whole as a work of fiction. Vladimir Nabokov (a hero of VanderMeer's, I understand) wrote something similar, and so did Gabriel Josipovici, in "Möbius the Stripper"; but for now VanderMeer has made the form his own. It's the circumcision of history we see, and it's as fun to read as it is to review. Even Shriek is not the highest power, because Janice Shriek has edited the package and introduces the Glossary/Index, which also takes up about a quarter of the book. Thus, an okay analogy might be: the single entity of a published account, smothered with scores of Post-It notes – with the artistic integrity and tautness of the former (deliberately) slackened by further authorial intrusion. It is all very strange; it is all very recommended. At the end there is even an advertisement for other Hoegbotton publications, including the no-doubt-riveting "Guide to Ambergris' Indigenous Janitors."

Put our minds to it and we can all think of a dozen examples of stories on the theme of wishes. Rudy Rucker's *Master of Space and Time* springs to mind, as does *The Pillow Friend* by Lisa Tuttle, or Larry Niven's "The Wishing Game." Furthermore, we all know the old saw about being careful what you wish for, just in case it arrives. If you have three wishes, can you wish for a million more wishes? Or do you use your wishes (as most of us would, let's face it) to obtain money, sex or power?

To his credit, Peter Atkins has largely avoided these waiting questions with *Wishmaster* (Pumpkin Books, £16.99), the second of this month's oddities in that it is actually a film script rather than a story or a novel, although it is accompanied by eleven bona-fide short stories... Except no, that's not quite right either, because there is still an odd flavour to "Doctor Arcadia," a story written, all 15 pages of it, in rhyming couplets. Or hows-about "If Thine Eye Offends Thee" or "If You Love Someone, Let Them Go" – which are less than half a page long each, and, by the way, good examples of short, sharp shocks? My favourite piece herein is "Here Comes a Candle," which I remember from *Fear* magazine a decade ago – and is a wonderful story



about what happens to people who try to clean up nursery rhymes.

Anyway, back to *Wishmaster* (and not "The" *Wishmaster* as it says on the disappointing cover). This is the script, probably after a bit of tinkering, of the 1997 Wes Craven-presented, successful independent feature; and it's a joy to read. The author's ear for the snippiness of speech is perfectly in play in this story of a mad-ar-se djinn who needs to grant people wishes (although sometimes even vaguer fancies will suffice) in order to become stronger – to bust these stinking humans open for their essence, sometimes literally. So when

I said in my review of the author's *Big Thunder* that Atkins's major skill is in the delineation of weirdness, or something like that, I could also have been referring to this current publication. A woman who would quite like to look the same forever gets just that: she is frozen into a mannequin. After a security guard dares to say sarcastically that he'd enjoy seeing the wishmaster try to go through *him*, we can almost hear the splat and rain.

But there are many jokes too, not least in the chatty style of direction. At one point we're told that we can forget about Barbara Eden when we think of genies. And then there are all

the characters' names: Etchison, Campbell, Aickman, Blackwood, Derleth, all make an appearance, like a punning attendance register for those in the know. This is far from being a hard-and-fast shooting script; it really feels as if Atkins has worked it over to present a credible fusion of prose and screenplay... Of course, the links between the short story and film are well established (with Elizabeth Bowen saying in 1937 that the two are of the same generation) and this sort of volume – half and half – is an enjoyable new way to behave.

David Mathew

Of all the classical forms, I suppose it's the Theme & Variations that most clearly distinguishes the sheep who truly love and understand music from goats like me who just enjoy their merry caprices and tragic overtures. From that it would seem to follow that Alan David Price's *The Other Side of the Mirror* (Citron, £7.99, B-format) is for the most intellectual aficionados of the vampire story, for it's a series of variations, not so much on the vampire as on the idea of the vampire.

The book contains 17 short stories and a novella, "Blood Libel," in which Rudolf Hoess (an historical character, who was Commandant of Auschwitz in its worst period) appears as a condemned war-criminal, busily writing his self-serving memoirs (which he actually did, though not as rendered by Price). The image presented, of the murdered Jews returning to a zombie-like afterlife, has a certain power, though I'm not sure what the surviving relatives of those who truly died and never rose will think of it. Perhaps by now they're used to their anguish being public property.

Regardless of my qualms, this one worked for me. Others worked less well, partly because of an over-reliance on the first-person story told from an obviously insane viewpoint in the manner of Bradbury and Sturgeon, but also because some of the ideas are feeble. "Stub," for example, features the members of an equestrian acrobatic troupe. They are presented, as weak-minded, feckless folk, without principles or self-discipline – which is to say, totally incapable of acquiring or maintaining their skills, an aspect of which Price seems unaware, though it must be central to any serious development of their story. "The Re-possessed" is even worse. It's written from the viewpoint of Michael who, having messed up his life in an unspecified fashion, is about to have his home re-possessed for non-payment. So does he look for work, meanwhile setting about the grim business of making a

## Theme & Variations

Chris Gilmore

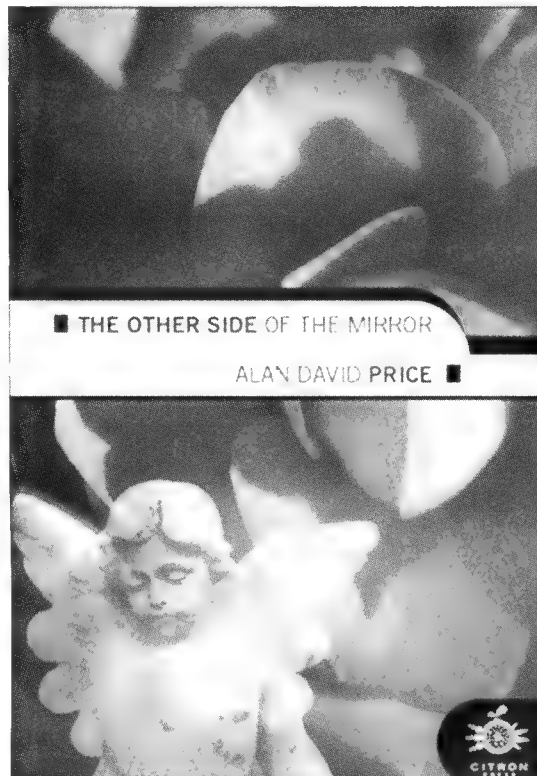
life for himself and his pregnant girlfriend in the sort of B&B the Local Authority makes available to people in their position? No, he gets drunk in Regent's Park, and at some point discharges his quasi-marital responsibilities by murdering her. This could, I suppose, be made to work as a very grim object-lesson on the dangers of spinelessness (Nabokov and Huxley both succeeded), but my impression was that Price regards Michael as deserving far more sympathy than contempt; by the ineluctable law of unintended consequences, he therefore got none from me.

As the book progresses, it becomes obvious that Price's concept of the vampire is broad enough to embrace anyone who batters on anyone else; yet it is rare to encounter an exploitative relationship which operates in only in one direction, even when it is certain that one principal mainly gains, mainly at the other's expense.

Consequently, I found the cumulative effect rather like being allowed to read only the propaganda of the political party I support, while that of its rivals was kept from me. Yes, of course... but surely there's another side?

The reviewer must read books of short stories straight through, which isn't going to be the best way when the writer has a narrow focus, however intense. Even so, I think Price needs to widen his range. It is, I think, significant that there are no magazine appearances acknowledged, suggesting that he has either failed to place them or chosen to disregard the market. Agreed, he has his own vision to impart, but to begin by seeking book publication may not have been the best approach.

Whoever writes it – Renault or Raven, Wilde or Waugh – gay fiction always seems obsessed with physical beauty. Anyone plain, or only run-of-the-mill handsome, is assumed to be straight. This applies even among those characters of



Poppy Z. Brite (who introduces the present book) who don't regard an affair as properly consummated until one party's beauty has suffered the defacement consequent upon being tortured, mutilated and partly eaten by the other.

Storm Constantine has evidently taken this principle to heart in composing *The Thorn Boy* (Eidolon, \$A11.95, B-format), a short novel set in the quasi-Persian court of King Alofel, and told in the first person by his favourite catamite, Darien. Darien is beautiful (of course) and by his own standards a nice person. For instance, if he notes that a rival may be rising in the king's favour, he poisons him, but not fatally – only enough to mar his beauty, whereupon the fickle and incurious Alofel invariably loses interest.

That gentle strategy won't work in the current case, however; among the spoils of Alofel's latest victory is Akaten, favourite catamite of King Harakhte his slain rival, whom Alofel wants restored to the bonhomie befitting a court ornament. For no obvious reason he selects Darien to bring back the roses to his cheeks. Reluctantly, Darien undertakes the assignment, and shortly makes the fatal error of becoming captivated by Akaten's beauty (what else?) – even neglecting his own best interests to the extent of preventing him from committing suicide. What with kindly treatment and physical propinquity, Akaten gets over Harakhte (more-or-less) and accepts Darien's overtures of love – as the whole palace soon knows; meanwhile the versatile but inobservant Alofel pays patient court to him, while assuaging himself on the persons of Darien himself and his favourite female concubine.

This is not the sort of story of which one expects a happy ending, nor does Constantine provide one. How could she, indeed, when both principals must lose their youthful bloom? "Though one be fair as roses, His beauty clouds and closes..." as seems not to have occurred to anyone between these covers. So who is brought down, and who rises again? In any tale of manipulation, there must be one who out-manipulates the other; and in any tale of tyranny, the tyrant himself can take direct action, cutting the Gordian Knot (or the odd spinal cord) to suit himself (cf Mark 6, 17-29, to which Constantine makes oblique reference).

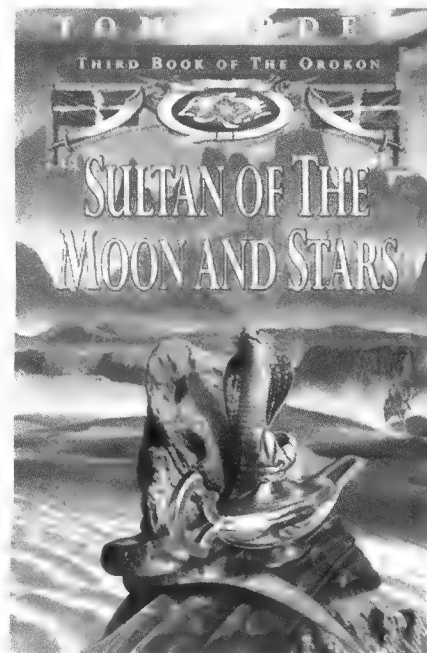
A story with so little substance must stand or fall by the quality of its writing. Constantine's is not at all bad, but both the subject-matter and the ambience scream for comparison with Mary Renault's *The Persian Boy* – a comparison which she can stand no better than any other merely good writer. Go back and re-read Renault instead (or



Storm Constantine, whose books are reviewed on pp 53 and this page. For more pics and information, visit her web site at <http://members.aol.com/MalakTawus/Storm.htm>

at any rate, as well) – and meanwhile, who's going to set a gay romance exclusively among the rough trade?

Reviewing *The King and Queen of Swords*, the second book of Tom Arden's *The Orokon*, in *Interzone* 139, I commented that the series was taking on certain aspects of the pantomime. In the third book, *Sultan of the Moon and Stars* (Gollancz, £16.99) that aspect has become even



stronger. New characters include an old sea-dog with a wooden leg who carries a mangy pet monkey on his shoulder, and a comic, quasi-Arab whoremaster called Eli Oli Ali. Can't you just hear the children giggling out that name in ragged chorus?

Yet the pantomime, with its camp jokes and ruthless exploitation of cliché is, like Arden's lyrical asides and sly digs at Islamic practice and pretensions, only one aspect of this long and complex romance; the tale of the Orokon is also a tale of cruelty and corruption, in which the sins of one generation must be redeemed by the next, and the price is often ruinous high. In the previous book *Cata*, the youthful heroine suffered premature and unwelcome sexual experience; in this one Rajal, the secondary hero, suffers something even worse on the same lines. Moreover, between these covers the boundary between good and evil is far from clear-cut; Bob Scarlet the romantic highwayman, whom one tends to count among the good guys, nevertheless shoots an old woman dead in cold blood. Granted, she was a comic old woman; and granted, Bob had been under a lot of strain recently; even so, such episodes have the power to deliver shock – and not to one's squeamishness, but to one's sense of propriety.

Arden has obviously taken to heart the adage, "Make 'em laugh, make 'em cry, make 'em wait." He's good at the first two, and the third comes automatically, as with so many sub-plots going there are always cliff-hangers or mysteries to be resolved. Well enough, for an entertainment, yet I suspect some of its potential audience will be disagreeably astonished by his many and vertiginous changes of tone and mood, which at times put me in mind of Bridget Wood. Myself, I could take them, mainly because he handles them well individually; but I found I could enjoy those sort of jokes only at the cost of ceasing to take the central tale of lovers sundered, re-united and re-sundered all that seriously. Moreover, I get the impression that Arden is having the same problem, and reacting as Nabokov did in the same circumstances – by stepping outside the frame to favour the reader with arch asides. Nothing wrong with that if you're in a decadent frame of mind, but once again, the price is borne by the story.

That story is still hanging together, though it's travelled rather a long way from its roots – to the city of Qatani and the Holy City of Kal-Thereon, which are the analogues to Baghdad and Mecca, respectively, in those aspects of the book which constitute Arden's *hommage* to the *1001 Nights*. Such a milieu provides a new crop of evil-doers to be routed, not without



loss, by the bright (or in some cases, rather dim) young things who are Arden's principals. It also offers scope for Arden's habit of disclosing that people are often more closely related than they might have guessed, and

when that fails, they may still prove to have analogues in unlikely places.

Altogether, great fun; and though I wouldn't want to go to the pantomime more than once a year, that's about Arden's rate of production, so no sweat.

Anyone who feels like serving a short prison sentence for refusing to pay a fine could do worse than bring in all five volumes once *The Orokon* is finished.

Chris Gilmore

**Northern Lights**, the first volume in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* fantasy trilogy, has been released as a series of Cavalcade Story Cassettes by Chivers Press. Ordinarily a straight reading of a readily available book would not warrant more than a mention in this column, but *Northern Lights* is unabridged, the narrative text is read by the author himself, and the dialogue is performed by a cast of no less than 15 actors (plus six children). This is a book that doesn't need to be adapted for dramatic presentation – Pullman's storytelling skills take care of that.

Part One, *Oxford* (3 tapes, 4 hours 17 minutes, £9.99), begins in the home town of Lyra, the feisty and resourceful heroine of the piece. This is the Oxford of a parallel world where people's souls take the visible forms of animals, where the rule of the Church is absolute, where science is called "experimental theology" and where polar bears are sentient and capable of speech. Alison Dowling is superb as the evil Mrs Coulter; in fact nobody disappoints, with the unfortunate exception of Joanna Wyatt as Lyra herself – she occasionally comes across as a little bit twee.

*Northern Lights* is marketed as a children's book, but by Part Two, *Bolvanger* (3 tapes, 3 hours 49 minutes, £9.99), it is pretty obvious that this is as adult as fantasy gets. We meet the polar bear Iorek Byrnison, perhaps the most likeable gentle giant since Donaldson's Saltheart Foamfollower; Sean Barrett's excellent interpretation might be described as Arnold Schwarzenegger with depth. And in the most distressing chapter I've ever encountered in a work of fiction, we get to learn what is meant by the phrase "severed child."

Part Three, *Svalbard* (2 tapes, 2 hours 42 minutes, £7.99), opens with a prolonged yet surprisingly enjoyable conversation between the Texan Lee Scoresby (Garrick Hagon) and the witch Serafina Pekkala (Sue Sheridan) – minor players at this point, but their day will come. Lyra's ingenuity and heroism drives the book towards its tragic climax, and sets the stage for the second volume, *The Subtle Knife*, which is due to be recorded later this year.

All three parts of *Northern*

## Audio Reviews

Paul Beardsley

*Lights* can be purchased as a boxed set for £24.99 from Chivers Press Limited, Windsor Bridge Road, Bath BA2 3AX (tel. 01225 335336; fax 01225 310771). Even if you're already familiar with *His Dark Materials*, it's still an excellent listening experience – I'd

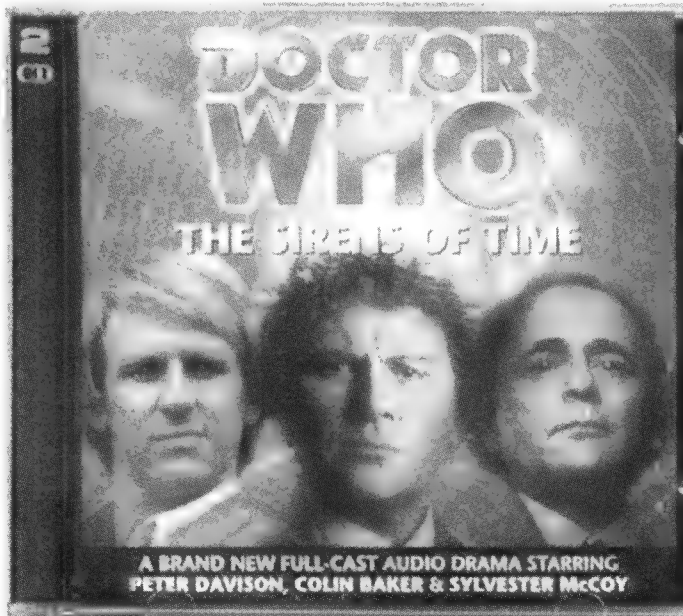
read the first two books less than two months before receiving the tapes, but this did nothing to diminish my enjoyment, or the suspense.

No less than three past Doctors return for a new range of *Doctor Who* audio plays – a major coup for Big Finish, producers of the occasionally excellent Bernice Summerfield adventures. All three Doctors appear in the first of these, *The Sirens of Time* by Nicholas Briggs. Part One sees Sylvester McCoy's Doctor stranded on a generic jungle planet, where he encounters a cackling crone from a bad pantomime and some robots that sound like Pinky and Perky. (Why do they do this?) Part Two raises the tone considerably as Peter Davison's Doctor is imprisoned on a World War One U-boat. Both plot and atmosphere thicken as we learn that he is not the only character to appear in multiple form. If only the whole play was this good... In Part Three, Colin Baker's Doctor arrives on an orbiting starship whose captain tells his pilot, "I would trust you to fly me stark naked through a cheese-grater." (How did that line escape the editor's scissors?) When all the ship's systems break down, you might expect the characters to experience weightlessness – after all, it's not exactly difficult to convey in an audio production. But no, that would be too much like getting the science right. In Part Four the three Doctors have another of their many get-togethers and sort everything out. The end.

Mark Gatiss's *Phantasmagoria* is a pseudo-historical featuring Peter

Davison's Doctor and Mark Strickson's Turlough. (A pseudo-historical, for the uninitiated, is a story in which anachronisms quickly overshadow period detail.) Ostensibly set in the early 18th century, this play makes no attempt to exploit either its setting or its medium. The result is like a watered-down version of the TV story *The Visitation* bereft of its visuals. At least the cast enjoyed themselves...

It is only with Justin Richards' *Whispers of Terror* that any attempt is made to really do something positive with the range. True, the premise is pretty implausible (concerning as it does a creature composed of pure



sound), the story is quite confusing and requires repeated listenings, and the casting of Lisa Bowerman as the villain was a big mistake – she's a good actress, but she's far too recognizable as Bernice. But at least it shows a preparedness to experiment, and to do it successfully.

I have high hopes for the range, but it really needs to be less backward-looking. Even the format is a pointless attempt to emulate the old TV series, complete with cliff-hanger reprises and a bogus continuity announcer. Come on you guys, this is audio – you can do anything!

All three plays are available on dou-

ble CD (£13.99) or double cassette (£9.99) from Big Finish Productions Ltd, PO Box 1127, Maidenhead, Berks SL6 3LN (tel. 01628 828283; fax 01628 828313).

Last Summer, Hodder Headline Audio-books released *Orson Welles in War of the Worlds and Other Stories by H. G. Wells*. (Double cassette, 2 hours, £8.99.) It's still available, so if you've ever wondered what caused America to panic back in 1938, it's worth checking out – the title play is the actual one broadcast. It's accompanied by "The Man Who Could Work Miracles," a humorous piece featuring

Alec Guinness, and the much more serious (and still very effective) "The Country of the Blind," starring Laurence Olivier.

I've seen some good stuff from Hodder Headline; unfortunately they're not very forthcoming with information. There's nothing in the inlay card to indicate when the "other stories" were broadcast, who else was involved in the productions, or even what else is available. *War of the Worlds* is labelled "Theatre Royale 4" – does this mean there's another three to collect, or what? I think we should be told.

Paul Beardsley

Jeanne Cortiel's *Demand My Writing: Joanna Russ/Feminism/Science Fiction* (Liverpool University Press, £15.95) places the fiction of Joanna Russ in the context of developments in feminist literary theory. This is an unenviable task for critic Jeanne Cortiel because it involves using methods of analysis that Russ herself has vociferously opposed. Russ's commitment to science as an enlightening and emancipatory activity runs counter to much feminist thought and, in particular, the practises of literary theory.

Russ's criticisms of modern literary theory of the psychoanalytic kind are outlined in *To Write Like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction* (Indiana University Press). She dismisses the practice of psycho-analysing literature as "understanding without effort" and as an "evasion of the hard questions" about society. Russ has been no less unforgiving of the enterprise of literary interpretation in general, arguing, "There is seldom more to a phenomenon than meets the eye, usually there is less and over-interpretation becomes a plague."

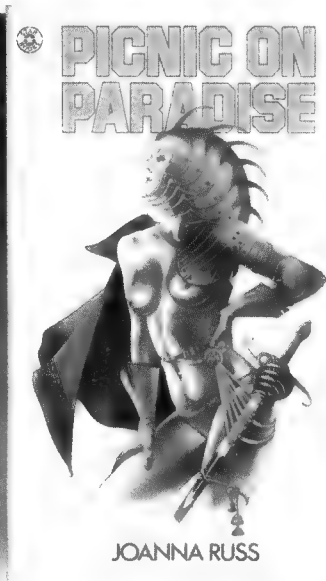
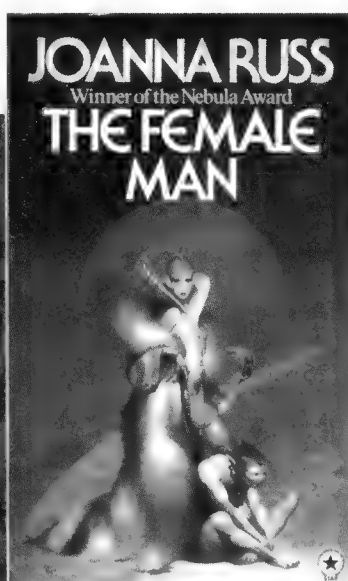
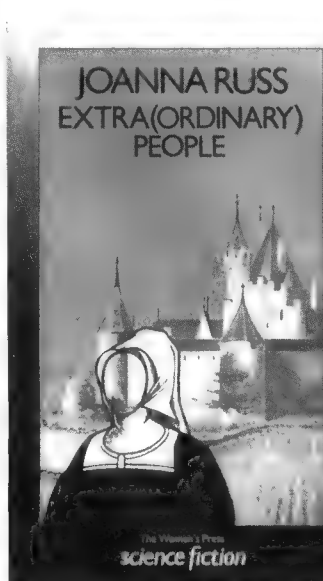
For Russ, science fiction should be evaluated in relation to the findings of sciences such as physics, astronomy,

psychology and sociology which open the world we know up for investigation and refutation. In the face of even the softest of these sciences, literary theorists should pack up and go home, but not before stopping to pass ownership of knowledge back to the real experts who are, in Russ's words, "us and our experience." But it is here that Cortiel's work raises important questions that have been central to the development of the feminist movement: what are the elements that constitute women's experience of oppression? Is it possible to speak of women's experience as a single phenomenon and, related to this, what does it mean to identify oneself as a woman?

Cortiel argues that the feminist movement contains three different ways of understanding and countering women's experience of oppression. Liberal feminism seeks to erase gender difference and seeks parity with men. Cultural feminism sees women as essentially different from men and tends towards separatism. Social constructivism, here conflated with post-modernism, sees woman as a constructed and sometimes misleading category that subsumes an individual's multiple experiences and

## Demanding More

Tim Robins



identities. The politics of the post-modern seeks to represent complex identities and blurs the boundaries between the human and "other" rendered alien by Liberalism's desperate quest for unity that often rests on exclusions and separatism's insistence on absolute difference.

Having identified different types of feminism, Cortiel proceeds to relate them to Russ's fiction. So, Russ's *The Adventures of Alyx* is seen partly as a liberal attempt to create a sword-and-sorcery heroine who was equal to a role often occupied by male characters. In contrast, Cortiel argues that *The Female Man* represents a more sophisticated politics in which the multiple possibilities and identities open to women are juxtaposed and evaluated. For those unfamiliar with Russ's book, it centres on Jeannine, Jael, Janet and Joanna, four versions of the same woman who have grown up in alternate, parallel worlds. Their individual struggles against men and their different responses to each other's worlds provide the dramatic and often humorous tensions in the book as Russ consciously explores the strengths and weaknesses of different possibilities for being a woman offered by different societies. As Cortiel notes "the speculative possibilities of science fiction make this genre a discursive space that is excellently suited for narrative experiments with such

alternative identities."

Cortiel follows much feminist literary theory in seeing writing as the creation of an imaginative space in which women writers and readers can develop a sense of their own self independently of men and explore forms of political action. This approach is exemplified by Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in which metaphors of space are used to understand women's actual exclusion from places of power, opportunities to act and, in particular, a place from which to write. Russ has also been concerned with the way narratives restrict or expand the role of women characters. She has argued "women cannot write using the old myths" and has advocated science and science fiction as a source of new, liberating stories.

What Cortiel's book does not do is evaluate Russ's work as *science* fiction. There is no evaluation of the scientific plausibility of Russ's imagined worlds existing or ever being achievable. Crucially, while Cortiel shows that Russ has been influenced by Marxist materialism, there is no explanation of the role of technology as part of the material conditions of change. Russ herself has rightly rejected technological determinism – technology in itself does not change society – but it is not clear how developments in the "soft sciences" informed or came to be represented in her work.

Neither does the book evaluate Russ

as a writer of science fiction. There is little discussion of stylistics. Russ feels oppression keenly and her sense of exclusion gives *The Female Man* its angry life. Instead, Cortiel values Russ's work for what can seem esoteric reasons. These include: creating "open, unstable texts which undermine dominant narratives," providing "sites where cultural transformation can occur" and "combining existing narratives that contradict each other to make 'queer' new stories for people who do not fully fit the norm."

Despite these reservations, there is much to recommend Cortiel's work. As an act of interpretation, it provides exemplary close readings of Russ's fiction and explores the different ways in which her stories represent women as active agents shaping, while being shaped by, their worlds. As an academic text, the book is agreeably difficult and accessible to anyone who will give it the time and effort to be understood. By placing Russ's work in the context of modern literary theory, this book will be a significant addition to the libraries of students of science fiction and literary/cultural studies. Anyone interested in enriching their understanding of science-fiction writing as a political practice should demand this book, but also demand more than the scholarly world of interpretation that it describes.

**Tim Robins**

So what do you expect from a book review? You expect the reviewer to tell you what they think of a book and why, with some kind of recommendation at least implicit. What do reviewers expect? They expect to air their opinions, not to be edited too harshly, and occasionally even to be paid for their work.

But there is more on both sides. If all a reader expected from a book review was an opinion with a bit of evidence, they would probably be happy with either very short reviews or even long dry academic screeds. Added entertainment would be nice, but isn't expected. Equally, the reviewer could simply hack out a bit of serviceable prose and take the money and run. But they hope to entertain, too. Believe me, they hope to entertain.

Obviously, none of this happens in the venerable marble halls of the publishing offices of *Interzone* – mostly because there are no such offices, but also because we who review in these pages do so largely because we love the books and in the hope that our feedback will make some difference in the publishing process. My recent ranting about poor production values of limited edition small press books is a case in point.

At the Friday night meeting down the pub recently, James Lovegrove

## More or Less Than Expected

*Paul Brazier*

(who has also been published by PS Publishing) asked me why I was making such a fuss about the quality of the PS Publishing products. I pointed out that in the same way as he spends a lot of time making his sentences work so that they disappear and the story comes through almost without the reader being aware of seeing the words, a good typographer tries to achieve this as well. Any failure in the typographic art means the reader finds a book less easy to read. But *readers*

don't see bad typography, they just experience difficulty reading the book, and usually will put that down to the writer not having done their job properly. Rarely would your average punter blame the typography for their lack of enjoyment in reading a book.

It is not enough to publish good writing; it has to be done properly. You wouldn't put on an art show of David Hockney or Vincent Van Gogh without giving careful consideration to the lighting, the hanging, or indeed the gallery. A small press has exactly the same responsibilities to its authors as a gallery does to its exhibitors. While showing Van Gogh and Hockney in a dingy back room in a slum will undoubtedly enhance the reputation of the gallery owner, that owner will find soon enough that the audience would rather go somewhere more salubrious and better lit.

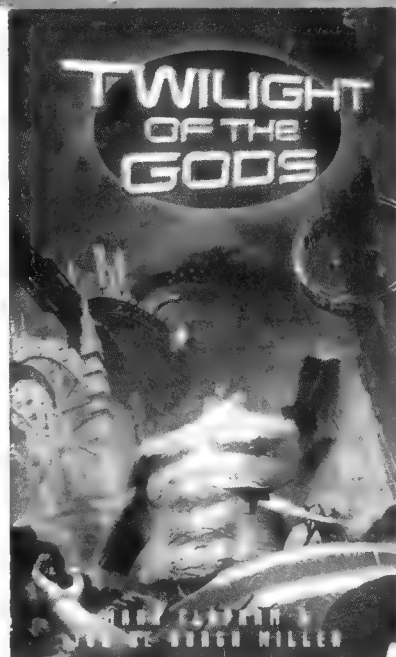
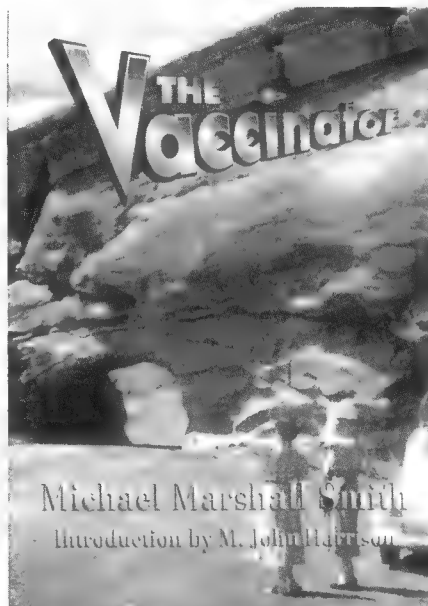
Nor will not inviting the critics evade criticism. PS Publishing may have stopped sending books to *Interzone* for review, but that doesn't stop us buying them and exercising our rights as consumers to comment on what we have bought. I have to hand *The Vaccinator* by Michael Marshall Smith (PS Publishing, £8 and £25), and it is only slightly less tacky than would be expected by someone who had been so disappointed by the pro-

duction of Graham Joyce's excellent *Leningrad Nights*. The story is exactly as characteristic of Smith as Joyce's is of his style. Graham Joyce writes strange supernatural stories of this century that have most of their horror buried in the heads of the protagonists, and *Leningrad Nights* is a stunning example of this. Smith produces altogether more robust and hard-boiled stories where the reader can't believe Smith could possibly countenance attempting such an obvious cliché, only to be left gasping by the fact that he not only countenanced it, but also made it convincing despite the fact that you had already guessed it, and then added an extra twist just to let you know who was really in charge here. Sometimes I find the casual brutality in Smith's fiction rather hard to take, which is not to say that it is gratuitous, but rather that in my own romantic way I would like fiction to leave the innocent bystanders alive at least. As it is, Smith takes a mélange of clichés and turns it into a riveting story with a panache that seems almost off-hand. My only complaint is again about the production values. Careful proof-reading would have removed the irritating solecisms that spoil both M. John Harrison's introduction and this otherwise perfect gem of a story.

Which is a lot more than I expected to say when I sat down to write this review. I just wanted to talk about which order the books came in. David Pringle wants me to start with the highest profile book and leave the tiddlers to last. I maintain that any regular reader would soon cotton on to this and so not bother reading the latter half of the review – they would expect not to be interested. Whereas, sad b\*\*\*\*\*d that I am, I expect the reader to read my deathless prose from beginning to end, because although it is a review of several books, for me it is a coherent whole piece of writing not amenable to such truncation. As such, I want to save the best bit till last so that the reader will want to read all the way through.

What I hope this means is that I get to work up from the bad to the good and you get a rising sense of anticipation which, if the final book is good enough, is properly resolved by the end of the piece, although variations on a theme means that once I have got you expecting that, I can change it around, as long as I still end strongly.

Nobody, then, will be surprised that the next review is of a middlingly important book. *Twilight of the Gods*, by Mark Clapham and Jon De Burgh Miller (Virgin, £5.99) appears to be the last of Virgin's sometime excellent series of *New Adventures*. And, as a swansong, this has to be the



saddest book I have ever read. Co-authorship usually means one of two things – either the two authors really get excited by each other's ideas and the result is awesome, or they find the whole thing a drudge, and only barely manage to cobble something together so they can pass the manuscript back to their oppo. Usually, the latter would merely result in an unacceptable book. However, if it was done with the knowledge that it was the last one – and certainly all the characters are neatly tied off at the end of this book – then no-one would care very much, not the writers, nor the editor (no matter how unprofessional that sounds), and a usually unacceptable piece of work would be accepted out of ennui – and that is what appears to have happened here. Truth to say, there are so many pieces of bad writing in the first 50 pages that the only reason I finished it was precisely because there are unlikely to be any more. Opening the book at random, this is what I find –

Benny watched helplessly as one of the serpents lunged for Jason's arm. Jason slammed his fist down on its head, knocking it out of his way. The serpent slowed, as if stunned, then returned to the rest of the pack, seemingly ready to attack once more. (Pg 81)

Picking out all the solecisms and infelicities, imprecisions and confusions could take the whole of this review, and is far more than any reader would expect. After all, it isn't typical of the book – it actually gets worse as you read on. Now we all know what to expect, we can move on. Next.

**The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror: Twelfth Annual Collection** edited by Ellen Datlow and Terry Windling (St Martin's Press, \$29.95) turned out to be far more than I expected, and consequently I have to admit to not having read every single word in this book. In fact it would be invidious to even try to comment on the stories one by one, partly because the broadness of the selection here reflects the overall character of the two genres rather than the taste or discrimination of the editors, and partly because this is more than just a collection of stories. Before the fiction begins there are over a hundred pages of non-fiction commentary, including an article on comics, and a depressingly long obituary section. On the fiction front, suffice it to say that all of the stories I have read are first class – even the ones I didn't like – and Datlow and Windling must do an astonishing amount of reading to find them. They also deserve plaudits for setting the likes of A.S. Byatt, Carol Ann Duffy and Jorge Luis Borges alongside genre stalwarts as diverse as Stephen King,



Michael Marshall Smith, Karen Joy Fowler and Dennis Etchison. It is good to bring such "mainstream" writers to the attention of what might otherwise be an overly genre-focused audience, especially as the genre writers do not suffer by the ensuing comparison.

Far more than just an annual "best of the genre" anthology, this is probably the closest the Fantasy and Horror genres come to having a yearbook. It is a very fine effort, and deserves success for its thoroughness alone. That it contains a huge amount of superb reading too is both an added bonus and a statement of the strength and depth of the genres covered, and thus makes it doubly value for money.

The cover of Jon Courtenay Grimwood's most recent novel, *redRobe* (Earthlight, £6.99), bears this commendatory quotation from *Locus* – "rapidly developing into a novelist worth watching." This hardly indicates what the reader might expect to find inside – such damning with faint praise was not even justified for his first or second novels. This, his fourth, establishes beyond doubt that Courtenay Grimwood is a novelist who rewards reading, and then re-reading. Far from being a writer to watch because he might become good, he is in fact a writer to read because he is good. Just watch him succeed. Mean-

time, this is what you should expect.

Picture if you will an Ian Fleming novel, with its high style, exotic locations, high stakes and the necessary violence they entail. Underlay that with a particularly complex Alistair Maclean-style plot, and overlay it with the gritty realism of one of Hammond Innes' sea tales. Push the whole shebang just far enough into the future that while everything looks kind of familiar, it is in fact so strange that the only readily recognisable facet is that, just like now, nothing makes sense if you look too closely. Now, populate the story with people who are so human, with their loyalties, drives, loves, hates, weaknesses, secrets, addictions and confusions, that you almost can't help identify with *all* of them, even the no-hopers and the villains. Imbue the whole with a world-weary dark humour that lends itself briefly to comparison with the best excesses of Michael Marshall Smith. And, finally, write in a prose so polished that everything appears to be reflected in the chromed bars of a Harley Davidson – distortions, dark-nesses, smell of oil, the whole bit – and you will start to begin to commence to having some idea of just how good this book is.

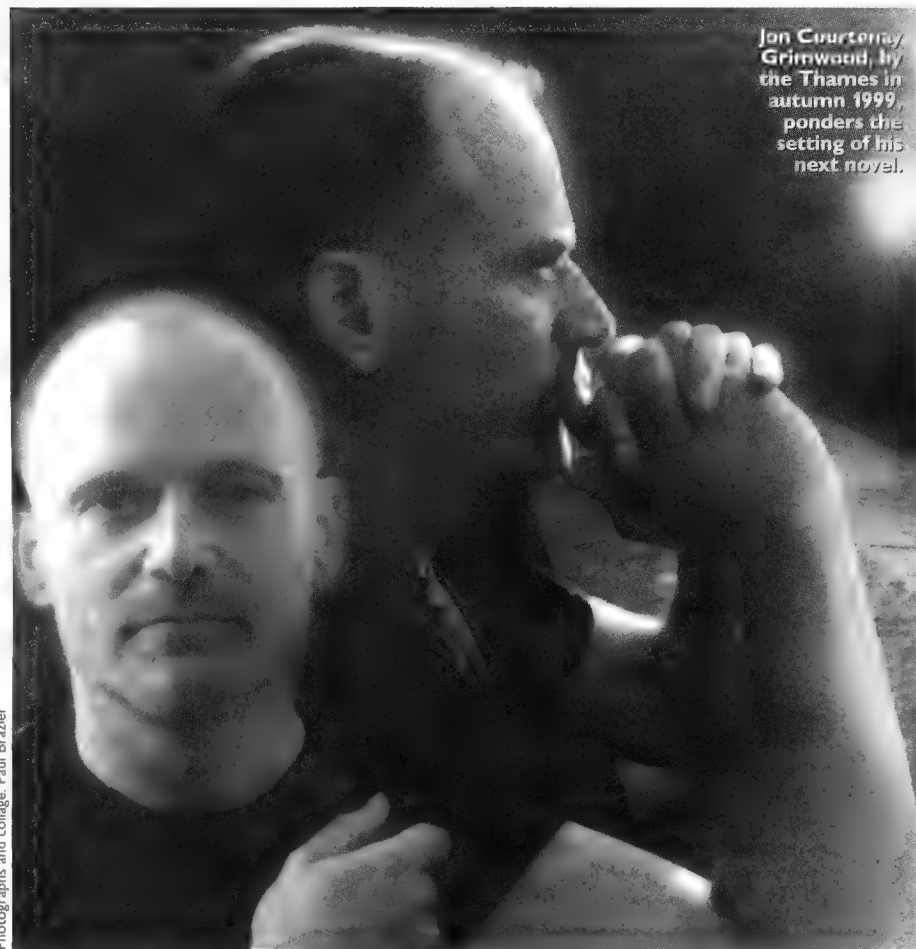
This review begins with a discussion of expectations. You can expect everything I have described here from this

book, and still not really get a strong idea of how compelling it is to read. In Courtenay Grimwood's previous books, I have found the exotic settings slightly distracting. Here, he invents a marvellously entertaining space-borne locale for his story and sets almost the entire action there. The result is a closing-in of focus that he has not managed so well before. But Courtenay Grimwood is no stranger to the concept that the backdrop in a science fiction tale is a character in the story, and he rarely uses the straight info dump that is the recourse of so many bad writers. Rather, on the frequent occasions that it is necessary to place another piece in the jigsaw puzzle that is the background of the story, the information presented also illuminates some facet of the characters' motivations while often adding a further cryptic clue to the development of the plot. That the whole thing is a *tour de force* is probably the most understated comment I can make. It isn't the usual delicate, sweetly nostalgic, densely packed sylvan novel of character that normally I am so taken by. Courtenay Grimwood's novel is big, bad, nasty and streetwise, but for all that is very very affecting. Buy it, read it, and see for yourselves.

An *afterword on expectations*: further into that conversation with James Lovegrove, it fell to me to bellow across the pub that "science fiction is dead," and, for those of you expecting *redRobe* to be science fiction, I have to say that it is not science fiction in any accepted sense of the term that I know. Of course, it partakes of sf, but "sf" is a marketing category used by publishers to point readers towards books similar to those they have already enjoyed; and there are readers out there who would enjoy this book but would avoid anything labelled "science fiction" as juvenile fantasy claptrap, which is where tripe of the "X-Files" and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* ilk have taken the genre.

If you must categorize *redRobe*, think of it as a science-fiction-horror-thriller-magical-realist-novel-of-character-comedy-satire and you'll be getting there. The market for fiction has shrunk so much that the old categories are moribund, and this is what led to the bellowed comment above. It seems that the publishers have decided to publish good books that have fantastic themes simply as fiction, and let readers make up their own minds. Those who still read for pleasure can actually discriminate sensibly, and if their expectation is that sf is crap, then better not tell them that the book they are going to enjoy so very much is sf. Expectations have to be fulfilled, not overthrown. Sf is dead. Long live sf – under another name.

Paul Brazier



Photographs and collage: Paul Brazier

# BOOKS RECEIVED



DECEMBER  
1999

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Alldiss, Brian W., with Roger Penrose. **White Mars; or, The Mind Set Free: A 21st-Century Utopia.** "Legal advisor: Laurence Lustgarten." St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-25473-3, 323pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1999; proof copy received; rumour has it that Little Brown slipped out a British edition of this last November, but we didn't see it [nor have we seen it reviewed]; a novel of ideas in the grand tradition, it looks to be a separate Wellsian book.) *April 2000.*

Ambrose, David. **The Discrete Charm of Charlie Monk.** Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-73514-5, 344pp, hardcover, £10. (Sf novel, first edition; it seems to feature human-chimp hybridization and virtual reality; we haven't been sent any books by this author before, but essentially he's a thriller writer, marketed for the mainstream, whose novels tend towards sf; he began his working life as a screenwriter, and is the author of three previous novels [all fantastic], *The Man Who Turned Into Himself*, *Mother of God* and *Superstition*, and a mainstream collection of short stories based on his film-writing experience, *Hollywood Lies*, which sounds interesting.) *14th January 2000.*

Anderson, Poul. **Genesis.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86707-7, 253pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a fairly short new book from the prolific Anderson, it's described as being "a superlative novel of artificial intelligence.") *February 2000.*

Asaro, Catherine. **Ascendant Sun.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86824-3, 374pp, hardcover, cover by Julie Bell, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; sequel to *The Last Hawk* [1997], in this scientist-author's "Skolian Empire" series of hard sf adventures.) *February 2000.*

Barnes, John. **Finity.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06891-4, 303pp, C-format paperback, cover by John Harris, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1999; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; it's a parallel-worlds thriller.) *20th January 2000.*

Bova, Ben. **Venus.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87216-X, 382pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; having done the Moon and Mars, Bova moves on...) *April 2000.*

Bradbury, Ray. **The Halloween Tree.** Illustrated by Joe Mugnaini. Earthlight, ISBN 0-671-03768-4, 181pp, A-format paperback, cover by Trevor Scobie, £5.99. (Juvenile horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1972.) *4th January 2000.*

Brenchley, Chaz. **Feast of the King's Shadow: The Second Book of Outremer.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-745-5, 648pp, A-format paperback, cover by Barbara Loft-house, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; second in a trilogy of full-fledged big commercial fantasies by an author hitherto best known for horror and crime fiction.) *4th February 2000.*

Britain, Kristen. **Green Rider.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-671-03303-4, 504pp, A-format paperback, cover by Keith Parkinson, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998; a BCF [Big Commercial Fantasy] debut novel

by a new American writer, commended by some of the usuals – Terry Goodkind and Anne McCaffrey.) *January (?) 2000.*

Bunch, Chris. **The Warrior King.** "The final volume in the epic tale of empire and magic." Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-951-2, 453pp, A-format paperback, cover by Keith Scaife, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; third in the trilogy which began with *The Seer King*.) *20th January 2000.*

Cherryh, C. J. **Fortress of Owls: A Galasien Novel.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648391-7, 406pp, A-format paperback, cover by Les Edwards, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; a follow-up to *Fortress in the Eye of Time* [1997] and *Fortress of Eagles* [1998].) *17th January 2000.*

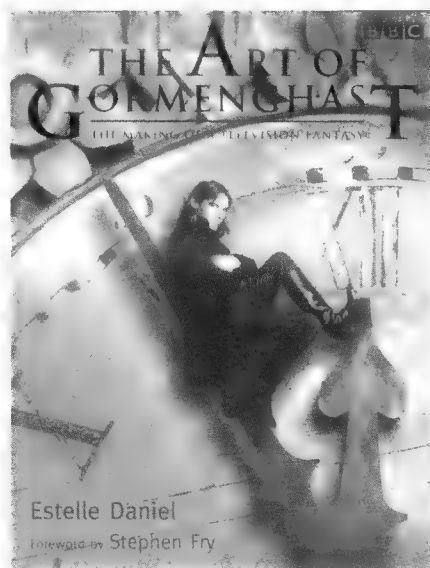
Clarke, Arthur C., and Stephen Baxter. **The Light of Other Days.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87199-6, 316pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; this looks as though it has been written mainly by Baxter, who may well be Clarke's ideal "collaborator"; it's dedicated "To Bob Shaw," who wrote a famous short story of the same title in the 1960s.) *March 2000.*

Constantine, Storm. **Sea Dragon Heir.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87306-9, 384pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1999; proof copy received; reviewed by Tom Arden in this issue of *Interzone*.) *February 2000.*

Cox, Steve. **Dreaming of Jeannie: TV's Prime Time in a Bottle.** "Photographs from the Howard Frank Archives." St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-20417-5, xiv+286pp, trade paperback, \$15.95. (Fantasy TV series episode guide and companion, first edition; proof copy received; about the NBC sitcom *I Dream of Jeannie* [1965-1970], which starred Barbara Eden and Larry Hagman, this is one to shelve alongside the similar book of a few years ago which was devoted to another 1960s fantasy sitcom, *Bewitched*; recommended, like that earlier book, to those for whom this sort of thing is nostalgic fun.) *March 2000.*

Daniel, Estelle. **The Art of Gormenghast: The Making of a Television Fantasy.** Foreword by Stephen Fry. HarperCollins/BBC, ISBN 0-00-257156-0, 160pp, very large-format paperback, £14.99. (Copiously illustrated TV fantasy serial "making of" book, first edition; an interesting study, illustrated with some of Peake's original drawings as well as with production sketches, photographs, etc., of the BBC 2 serial directed by Andy Wilson and scripted by Malcolm McKay from the novels *Titus Groan* [1946] and *Gormenghast* [1950] by Mervyn Peake; the author, Estelle Daniel, is also the producer of the serial.) *10th January 2000.*

Dozois, Gardner, ed. **Explorers: SF Adventures to Far Horizons.** St Martin's Griffin, ISBN 0-312-25462-8, xi+481pp, trade



paperback, cover by Chesley Bonestell, \$17.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; proof copy received; a follow-up to Dozois's earlier anthologies of adventure sf, *The Good Old Stuff* [1998] and *The Good New Stuff* [1999], it contains reprint stories on the space-exploration theme, chronologically arranged from 1951 to 1998, by Poul Anderson, Stephen Baxter, Gregory Benford, Arthur C. Clarke, Hal Clement, Greg Egan, Ursula Le Guin, Larry Niven, Kim Stanley Robinson, James H. Schmitz, Cordwainer Smith, James Tiptree, Jr, John Varley, Roger Zelazny and other worthies.) April 2000.

Drake, David. **Queen of Demons.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-823-X, 662pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998; second in the trilogy which began with *Lord of the Isles* [1997].) 30th December 1999.

Elliott, Kate. **The Burning Stone: Volume Three of Crown of Stars.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-976-8, xii+916pp, A-format paperback, cover by Melvin Grant, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; "Kate Elliott" is a pseudonym of Alis A. Rasmussen; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 150.) 10th February 2000.

Farren, Mick. **Darklost.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86979-7, 412pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; this appears to be a follow-up to an earlier vampire novel called *A Time of Feasting*, which we didn't see; it's nice to know that Farren, who now lives in Los Angeles, and who used to be British [and to write sf], is still alive and kicking.) March 2000.

Féval, Paul. **Vampire City.** Translated, with introduction, afterword and notes, by Brian Stableford. Illustrated by Tim Denton. Sarob Press ["Brynderwen," 41 Forest View, Mountain Ash, Wales CF45 3DU], ISBN 1-902309-07-3, xvii+124pp, hardcover, cover by Denton, £20. (Humorous horror novel, first published in France, 1875 ["although internal evidence suggests that it must have been written eight years earlier, probably for serialization in a French newspaper," according to Stableford]; first edition in English, limited to 250 numbered copies; taking a rise out of English Gothicism of the kind associated with Mrs Radcliffe, this is an unusual and little-known example of French "feuilleton" literature – i.e. the newspaper serials which were so popular and so numerous in mid-19th-century Parisian publishing; Paul Féval [1817-1887] was perhaps the third best-known of the *feuilletonists*, following Alexandre Dumas and Eugène Sue; recommended.) December 1999.

Flynn, Michael. **Lodestar.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86137-0, 365pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the latest in the near-future, hard sf epic sequence begun in *Firestar* [1996] and *Rogue Star* [1998].) March 2000.



Friedman, C. S. **This Alien Shore.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648375-5, 564pp, A-format paperback, cover by Michael Whelan, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1998 [not "2000" as it states inside]; a big, romantic space opera; in her acknowledgments, the author names Cordwainer Smith as an influence: "He is one of the most remarkable writers of the 20th century, and one of its most bizarre imaginative artists"; reviewed by Paul J. McAuley in *Interzone* 142.) 17th January 2000.

Garnett, David. **Bikini Planet.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-950-4, 344pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Bolton, £5.99. (Humorous sf novel, first edition; set in the 23rd century, and concerning "a ruthless war for the galaxy's ultimate seaside resort," it's pref-



aced by three pages of remarkable peer quotes, ranging from Stephen Baxter to David Wingrove, and saying things like, "I look forward eagerly to the appearance of his last work" [Richard Cowper], "A billion monkeys working on a billion typewriters for a billion years couldn't have come up with this one" [Paul J. McAuley], "As good books go, this is one of them" [Kim Newman] and "If science fiction's founding father H. G. Wells were able to read this astonishing book, he would be alive today" [David Langford]; well, Dave Garnett obviously has a lot of friends.) 4th February 2000.

Gerrold, David. **Jumping Off the Planet.** "Book One in *The Starsiders Trilogy*." Tor, ISBN 0-312-89069-9, 285pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Juvenile sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; yet more pseudo-Heinlein; you can tell Gerrold is attempting to be Heinlein from the first couple of lines: "'I've got an idea!' Dad said. 'Let's go to the moon.' 'Huh – ?' I looked up from my comic.") March 2000.

Gray, Julia. **Isle of the Dead.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-978-4, 410pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; "Julia Gray," we were told when her first book, *Ice Mage*, came out in December 1998, is "the pseudonym of an author whose previous novels have sold over 300,000 copies"; rumour has it that she is Mark and Julia Smith, who previously wrote as "Jonathan Wylie"; apparently, she has published another novel in the interim, *Fire Music* [Orbit, July 1999], but we didn't see that.) 4th February 2000.

Green, Roland J. **Voyage to Eneh: Book One of The Seas of Kilmoyne.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87231-3, 384pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's blurb'd as "a thrilling novel of military science fiction and naval warfare.") March 2000.

Greenwood, Ed. **The Kingless Land: A Tale of the Band of Four.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86721-2, 304pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; Greenwood is an erstwhile "Forgotten Realms" gaming-fantasy writer, and this appears to be his first non-tie-in novel.) February 2000.

Gresh, Lois H., and Robert Weinberg. **The Termination Node.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-41246-X, 302pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1999; it's described by the *New York Times Book Review* as a "breathless computer-driven techno-thriller"; a hardcover edition appeared in January 1999, but we didn't receive that; there's an interesting eight-page interview with the authors at the rear of the book; although Weinberg has written a number of novels [mainly fantasy], this seems to be a debut novel for computer-scientist Gresh [a short story of hers appeared



in *Interzone* 94].) *Late entry: November publication, received in December 1999.*

Guida, Fred. **A Christmas Carol and Its Adaptations: A Critical Examination of Dickens's Story and Its Productions on Screen and Television.**

Foreword by Edward Wagenknecht. McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0738-7, xii+264pp, hardcover, \$45. (Illustrated study of the classic fantasy novella by Charles Dickens and its numerous adaptations; first edition; this book is excellent, better than most McFarland titles we have seen: intelligently written and painstaking in its detail – a model for how this sort of thing should be done; the foreword by eminent Dickens scholar Edward Wagenknecht is also a pleasant surprise: Mr Wagenknecht must have attained a very ripe age indeed by now, as he himself testifies when he writes, "I can claim to have made my first vital contact with Dickens the Saturday night in 1911 when I first encountered Vitagraph's three-reel production of *A Tale of Two Cities*" – 1911!) *March 2000.*

Hambly, Barbara. **Knight of the Demon Queen.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-42189-2, 263pp, hardcover, \$24. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; sequel to *Dragonsbane* and *Dragonshadow*.) *February 2000.*

Harman, Andrew. **The Suburban Salamander Incident.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-733-1, ix+338pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Posen, £5.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; it involves eco-terrorism and mythical beasts.) *4th February 2000.*

Harrison, Harry. **Bill the Galactic Hero.** Millennium, 1-85798-905-8, 160pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Humorous sf novel, first published in the USA, 1965.) *30th December 1999.*

Harvey, A. D. **Warriors of the Rainbow.** Bloomsbury, ISBN 0-7575-4732-7, 187pp, trade paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; presented as mainstream fiction, this one is described in the usual publishers' "sf"-avoiding coded language as "a humorous and compelling parable for our times... in the tradition of Wells, Huxley and Orwell"; presumably a debut novel by a British writer, it's set in the near future and seems to carry an environmentalist burden; the author is described, somewhat mysteriously, as "a contributor to leading American, British, Dutch, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Russian and Swiss scholarly quarterlies.") *12th March 2000.*

Holland, David. **Murcheston: The Wolf's Tale.** Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-87213-5, 349pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Historical horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; a "gaslight romance" [to invoke *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy's* term] set in Victorian times, this is by an American author and is presumably his debut novel; he should not

be confused with British writer Tom Holland [who himself should not be confused with American horror-movie director Tom Holland], even though their surnames are the same and their subject-matter and settings are similar; Richard Matheson and Loren D. Estleman commend this one on the proof copy's cover.) *February 2000.*

Kube-McDowell, Michael P., and Mike McQuay. **Isaac Asimov's Robot City, Volume One.** Simon & Schuster/ibooks, ISBN 0-671-03893-1, 448pp, trade paperback, cover by Paul Rivoche, £9.99. (Sf sharecrop omnibus, first published in the USA, 1999; the two novels it contains, *Odyssey* by Kube-McDowell, and *Suspicion* by McQuay, each with an introduction by the late Isaac Asimov [who supplied many of the ideas], were originally published in the USA in 1987; this is the American edition of November 1999, with a UK price and publication date specified.) *25th January 2000.*

Lauria, Frank. **End of Days.** St Martin's Paperbacks, ISBN 0-312-97262-8, 244pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Horror/fantasy movie novelization, first edition; based on a screenplay by Andrew W. Marlowe for the film directed by Peter Hyams and starring Arnold Schwarzenegger.) *Late entry: November publication, received in December 1999.*

Lawhead, Stephen. **The Black Rood: The Celtic Crusades, Book II.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224666-X, 582pp, hardcover, cover by Mick Posen, £17.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first edition [?]; follow-up to *The Iron Lance* [1998]; the black rood of the title is "the beam which supported Christ during his crucifixion.") *7th February 2000.*

Marillier, Juliet. **Daughter of the Forest: Book One of the Sevenwaters Trilogy.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224736-4, 538pp, C-format paperback, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 1999; proof copy received; a debut novel by a New Zealand-born writer, now resident in Australia; the accompanying publicity letter from editor Jane Johnson states: "If you loved *The Mists of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer Bradley, Anya Seton's *Avalon* or Mary Stewart's *The Crystal Cave*, then this is the book for you.") *3rd April 2000.*

Marillier, Juliet. **Daughter of the Forest: Book One of the Sevenwaters Trilogy.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-84879-X, vii+538pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 1999; proof copy received; this is identical to the above HarperCollins/Voyager edition except that the cover art differs – in neither case, though, is an artist credited.) *May 2000.*

May, Julian. **Orion Arm: An Adventure of the Rampart Worlds.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224714-3, 364pp, C-format paperback, cover by Stephen Bradbury, £10.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA [?], 1999;

the subtitle on the cover reads "The Rampart Worlds: Book 2.") *17th January 2000.*

Miéville, China. **Perdido Street Station.** Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-78172-4, 717pp, hardcover, cover by Edward Miller, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the author's second novel, following the widely-praised *King Rat*, it's described as "an epic urban fantasy on a dazzling scale"; M. John Harrison is among the many who commend Miéville's writing, and indeed this novel, set in "the metropolis of New Crobuzon," does look a bit *Viriconium*-like.) *24th March 2000.*

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **Colours of Chaos.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-957-1, xii+832pp, A-format paperback, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; the ninth "Reduce" novel.) *20th January 2000.*

Moon, Elizabeth. **Once a Hero: Book Four of The Serrano Legacy.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-956-3, 400pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1997; more quasi-feminist space operatics.) *20th January 2000.*

Moreira, Silvana, and Antonio de Macedo, eds. **Sinning in Sevens/Pecar a Sete.** "On the Edge of the Empire: 4th Encounters of Science Fiction and Fantasy." Simetria FC & F [Pavilhao do Dramatigo de Cascais, Av. da Republica, 2750-475 Cascais, Portugal], ISBN 972-97495-2-3, 161pp + 165pp, trade paperback, cover by Joao Cesario, no price shown. (Sf anthology, first edition; published to coincide with the fourth annual sf conference held in Cascais, near Lisbon, Portugal, it contains stories by the 1999 foreign guest of honour, Norman Spinrad, plus ten stories by Portuguese-language authors [one of whom, David Alan Prescott, is actually of British origin]; the texts are presented in both Portuguese and English, *dos à dos*; for further information, e-mail [simetria@esoterica.pt](mailto:simetria@esoterica.pt).) *Late entry: October publication, received in December 1999.*

Pohl, Frederik, ed. **The SFWA Grand Masters, Volume Two.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86879-0, 432pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; proof copy received; it contains four or five stories apiece by Andre Norton, Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, Alfred Bester and Ray Bradbury – the second five winners of the Science Fiction Writers of America's "Grand Master" award; of the five masters represented here, two – Asimov and Bester – are now deceased; as with the first volume, it's a worthy anthology of [inevitably] very familiar material.) *February 2000.*

Pratchett, Terry. **The City Watch Trilogy: Guards! Guards!, Men at Arms, Feet of Clay.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06798-5, 759pp, hardcover, cover by Josh Kirby,



£16.99. (Humorous fantasy omnibus, first edition; the three novels, all in the celebrated "Discworld" series, were first published in the UK in 1989, 1993 and 1996; they are three of Pratchett's best.) 9th December 1999.

Reynolds, Alastair. **Revelation Space.** "The first great sf novel of the century." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06876-0, 475pp, C-format paperback, £10.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut novel by a Dutch-resident British writer already well-known to readers of this magazine for his short stories; it's a 200,000-word hard-sf blockbuster, puffed by Paul J. McAuley as "hugely ambitious" and by Stephen Baxter as "ferociously intelligent.") 16th March 2000.

Salvatore, R. A. **The Demon Spirit.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-904-X, vii+521pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998; second in the trilogy which began with *The Demon Awakens* [1998].) 30th December 1999.

Sands, Karen, and Marietta Frank. **Back in the Spaceship Again: Juvenile Science Fiction Series Since 1945.** "Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy, Number 84." Greenwood Press, ISBN 0-313-30192-1, x+152pp, hardcover, £39.95. (Critical study and checklist of post-World War II juvenile sf series published in book form; first published in the USA, 1999; this is the American first edition with a British price specified, distributed in the UK by Eurospan, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LU; many of the books we cut our sf teeth on are described and discussed here – from Capt. W. E. Johns's "Kings of Space" series [oohh!] to John Christopher's "Tripods" trilogy [aahh!]; can't see a mention of Angus MacVicar's "Lost Planet" series, though, or E. C. Elliott's "Kemlo" – so it must be selective, at least when it comes to British material.) Late entry: September publication, received in December 1999.

Silverberg, Robert. **The Book of Skulls.** "SF Masterworks, 23." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-914-7, 222pp, B-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1971.) 30th December 1999.

Silverberg, Robert. **Valentine Pontifex.** "A novel in the legendary Majipoor Cycle." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648378-X, 347pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1983; first Voyager printing [it was previously a Pan paperback in the UK].) 4th January 2000.

Sinclair, Alison. **Cavalcade.** Millennium, 1-85798-564-8, 299pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1998; Sinclair's third novel, following *Legacies* [1995] and *Blueheart* [1996]; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 142.) 30th December 1999.

Smith, Michael Marshall. **What You Make It: A Book of Short Stories.** Harper-Collins, ISBN 0-00-651007-8, xiv+400pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror/sf collection, first published in 1999; British writer Smith's first gathering of shorter work, it contains 17 stories and a brief poem, a few of them new to this book but most of them reprinted from original anthologies edited by people like Crowther, Datlow, Jones & Sutton, and Royle; one story, "Save As...", first appeared in *Interzone* [in fact, it's the only story here which is credited to a magazine]; reviewed by Peter Crowther in *Interzone* 147 and by David Mathew in *Interzone* 148.) 4th January 2000.

Stasheff, Christopher. **A Wizard and a Warlord.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86649-6, 224pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; latest in the "Chronicles of the Rogue Wizard" sub-series of Stasheff's interminable science-fantasy series which began way-back-when [well, in 1969 to be precise] with *The Warlock in Spite of Himself*.) February 2000.

Tallis, Frank. **Sensing Others.** Hamish Hamilton, ISBN 0-241-14031-5, 296pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Mainstream novel with possible sf elements, first edition; a second novel by the author of the "mainstream sf" *Killing Time* [1999], which was praised by Tom Arden in *Interzone* 151; this one is described as "a dark, erotic and irreverent urban thriller.") 27th April 2000.

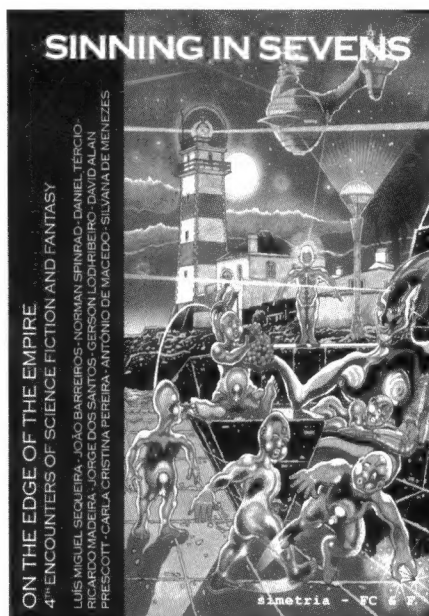
Thompson, Colin. **Future Eden.** "A Brief History of Next Time." Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-689-82774-1, 252pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Humorous sf/fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 1999; set in the 23rd century, and yet another sf work aimed at the mainstream audience, it's described as the "first major novel" by this British-born, Australian-resident author

who is "best known as the artist and author of spectacular surrealist picture books"; apparently it was originally written in the form of daily episodes on its author's website.) January 2000.

Tabb, E. C. **The Sleeping City: The Second Chronicle of Malkar.** Cosmos Books [32 Tynedale Ave., Wallsend, Tyne & Wear NE28 9LS], ISBN 0-9668968-1-5, 129pp, small-press paperback, cover by Ron Turner, £6. (Fantasy novel, first edition; follow-up to *Death God's Doom* [1999]; the publisher here is Philip Harbottle, and as with the first volume the book is nicely produced; published simultaneously in the UK and the USA [at \$12]; it states "July 1999" inside, but we are advised that date is incorrect.) Late entry: October publication, received in December 1999.

Wells, H. G. **The Time Machine. The War of the Worlds.** "SF Masterworks, 24." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-887-6, 274pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf omnibus, first edition in this form; the two short novels it contains were originally published in the UK, 1895 and 1898 [following serializations in *The New Review* and *Pearson's Magazine* – Wells was just as much a "magazine writer" as any later contributor to the sf genre]; last month we said of a previous entrant in this "Masterworks" series, Olaf Stapledon, "the sf fan who hasn't read *Star Maker* is a bit like the student of world literature who hasn't read Dante's *Divine Comedy* or Milton's *Paradise Lost*"; this time we might add that the same hypothetical sf fan who hasn't read these two fundamental tales of Wells's is a bit like the literature student who hasn't read Shakespeare.) 16th December 1999.

Wells, H. G. **When the Sleeper Wakes: A Critical Text of the 1899 New York and London First Edition, with an Introduction and Appendices.** Edited by Leon Stover. "The Annotated H. G. Wells, 5." McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0666-6, xi+465pp, hardcover, \$55. (Sf novel, first published in 1899, here heavily annotated by an American academic; first edition in this form; we haven't seen the other Stover-edited editions of Wells's scientific romances, but they include *The Time Machine* [1996], *The Island of Dr Moreau* [1996], *The Invisible Man* [1998], *The War of the Worlds* [apparently not yet published] and *The First Men in the Moon* [published out of sequence, 1998]; on the face of it, he appears to have done a very thorough job here, with copious notes, some of which fill more than half of the text pages; it's a pity these editions couldn't have included more of the original magazine illustrations – just one is included here, as a frontispiece; *When the Sleeper Wakes* was first serialized in *Harper's Weekly* [USA] and *The Graphic* [UK], January-May 1899.) March 2000.



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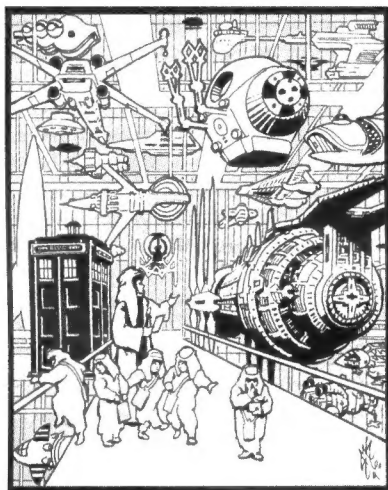
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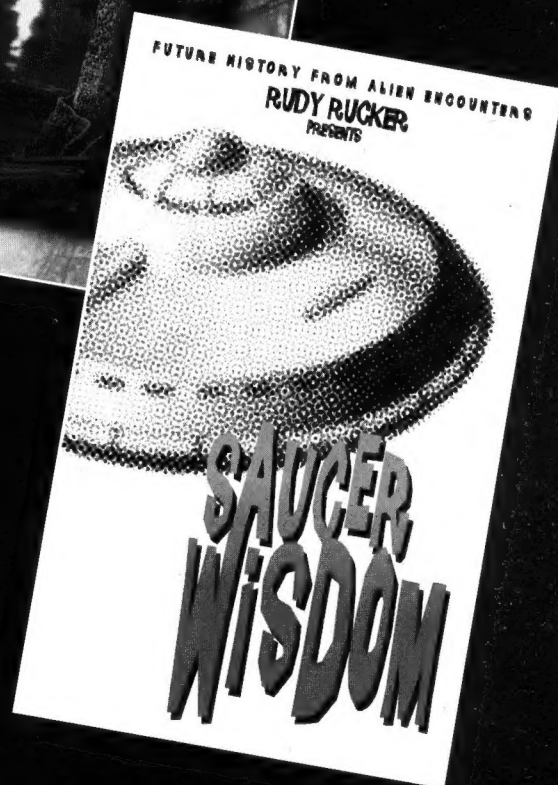
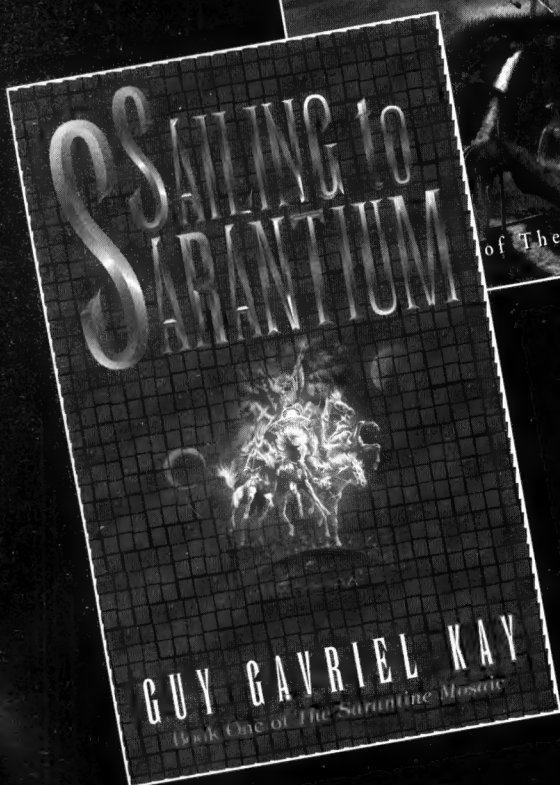
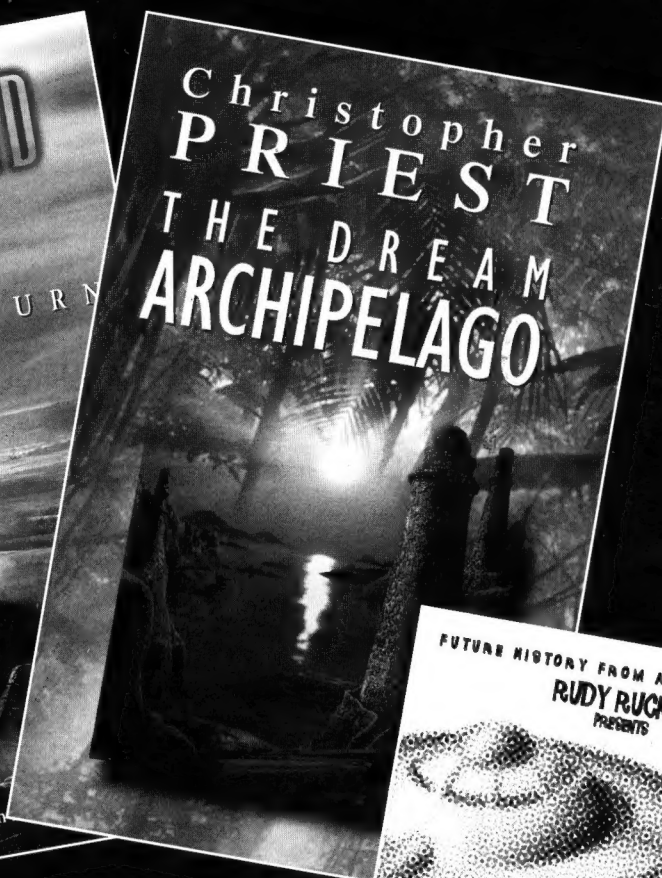
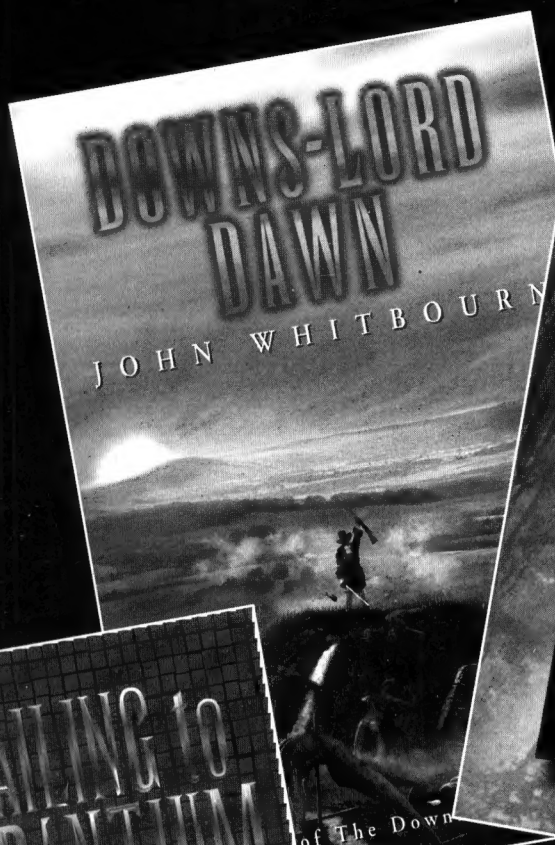


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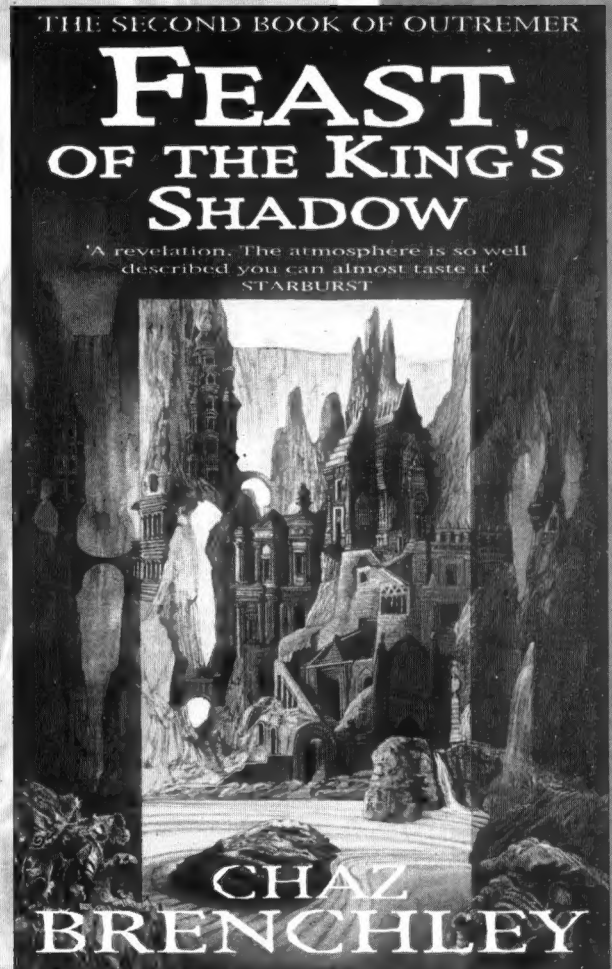
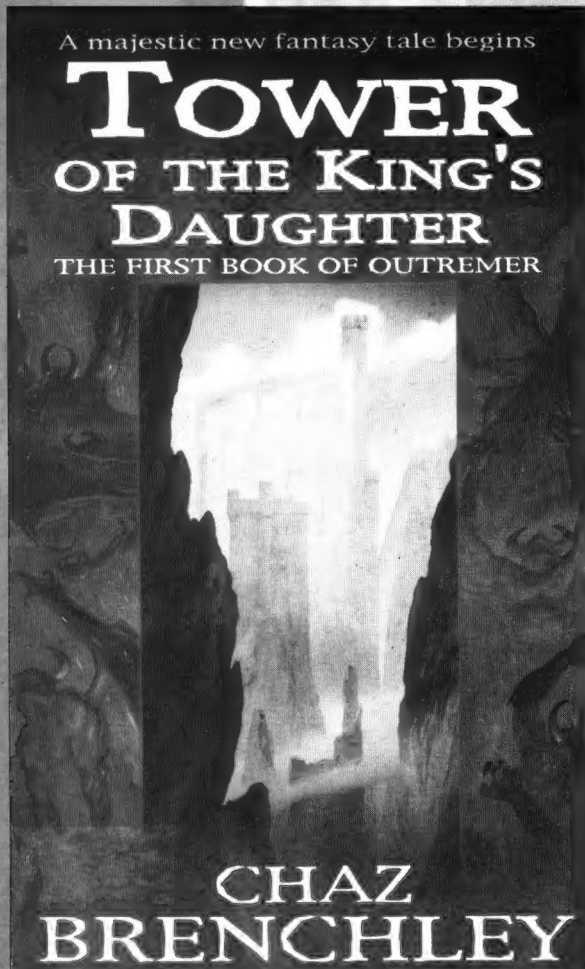
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